6 Towards autonomy

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Autonomy and automaticity

In the diary he kept of his Portuguese-learning experience in Brazil, the researcher Dick Schmidt records the frustration of being a beginner:

> Week 2
> I *hate* the feeling of being unable to talk to people around me. I'm used to chatting with people all day long, and I don't like this silence. ... Today P and I were at the beach, a guy came up for a cigarette, sat down and wanted to talk. He asked if I were American, and I said *sim*. He said something I didn't comprehend at all, so I didn't respond. He said, 'Well, obviously communication with you would be very difficult' (I *did* understand that, though I can't remember any of the words now), and left.

Three months later, Schmidt was able to report:

> Week 18
> Last night I was really up, self-confident, feeling fluent ... At one point, M said to F that she should speak more slowly for me, but I said no, please don't, I don't need it anymore.

In no longer needing others to assist him, Schmidt had achieved a degree of **autonomy** that was a far remove from his initial helplessness. This autonomy (which applied only in certain situations: he confessed that he still couldn't have fielded questions in Portuguese at the end of a lecture) was partly due to the increased **automaticity** of his language production, what he experienced as 'feeling fluent'. As we have seen, the ability to automatize the more mechanical elements of a task so as to free attention for higher-level activities is one characteristic of skilled performers, whether the skill be driving a car, playing a musical instrument, or speaking a second language. Other characteristics of skilled performers are:

- **speed** – skilled performers work fast, although speed alone is not the only indicator of skilfulness
- **economy** – skilled performers ignore inessentials and know how to carry out tasks using minimal means
- **accuracy** – skilled performers are quick at detecting and rejecting errors
- **anticipation** – skilled performers can think and plan ahead
- **reliability** – compared to unskilled performers, skilled performers are less likely to under-perform in adverse conditions

In sociocultural terms, autonomy is the capacity to self-regulate performance as a consequence of gaining control over skills that were formerly other-regulated. Moreover, the self-confidence gained in achieving a degree of autonomy, however fleeting, can be a powerful incentive for taking further risks in this direction. This is why classroom speaking activities that involve minimal assistance, and where learners can take risks and boost their confidence, provide an important launch pad for subsequent real-world language use. This is particularly the case if the classroom learner is performing under what are called **real operating conditions**, i.e. those conditions that involve the kinds of urgency, unpredictability, and spontaneity that often characterize real-life speech events. It is one thing, for example, to deliver fluidly a prepared speech, but it is quite another to respond to questions from the audience at the end. In this chapter we will look at ways that learners can experience a degree of autonomy as speakers and in real operating conditions. This will first involve establishing some general criteria for selecting and designing classroom speaking tasks as well as a discussion on how best to provide feedback, including correction, on such tasks.

Criteria for speaking tasks

In order to maximize speaking opportunities and increase the chances that learners will experience autonomous language use, the following conditions need to be met:

- **Productivity** – a speaking activity needs to be maximally language productive in order to provide the best conditions for autonomous language use. If students can do an information gap task by simply exchanging isolated words, or if only a couple of students participate in a group discussion, the tasks may hardly justify the time spent setting them up. This is also the case, of course, if learners are speaking mainly in their L1.

- **Purposefulness** – often language productivity can be increased by making sure that the speaking activity has a clear outcome, especially one which requires learners to work together to achieve a common purpose. For example, the aim of having to reach a jointly agreed decision can give a discussion more point and encourage the participation of all members. Requiring learners to report to the class on their discussion is also an effective way of ensuring a greater degree of commitment to the task. A competitive element – such as turning the task into a race – can also help.

- **Interactivity** – activities should require learners to take into account the effect they are having on their audience. If not, they can hardly be said to be good preparation for real-life language use. Even formal, monologic speaking tasks such as talks and presentations should be performed in situations where there is at least the possibility of interaction, e.g. where there is an audience present, one which can demonstrate interest, understanding, and even ask questions or make comments at the end.
- **Challenge** – the task should stretch the learners so that they are forced to draw on their available communicative resources to achieve the outcome. This will help them experience the sense of achievement, even excitement, that is part of autonomous language use. Of course, if the degree of challenge is *too* high, this can be counterproductive, inhibiting learners or reducing them to speaking in their L1. The teacher needs to be sensitive to the degree of difficulty a task presents individual learners and to adjust the task accordingly.
- **Safety** – while learners should be challenged, they also need to feel confident that, when meeting those challenges and attempting autonomous language use, they can do so without too much risk. The classroom should provide the right conditions for experimentation, including a supportive classroom dynamic and a non-judgmental attitude to error on the part of the teacher. Also, learners need to be secure in the knowledge that the teacher – like a driving instructor – will always be there to take over if things get seriously out of hand.
- **Authenticity** – speaking tasks should have some relation to real-life language use. If not, they are poor preparation for autonomy. Of course, many classroom activities – such as drills and language games – can be justified on the grounds that they serve the needs of awareness-raising or of appropriation. But, in order to become autonomous, learners will need to experience a quality of communication in the classroom that is essentially the same as communication outside the classroom. This means that they will, at times, need to perform in real operating conditions, e.g. spontaneously, unassisted, with minimal preparation, and making do with their existing resources. It also means that the kinds of topics, genres, and situations that are selected for speaking tasks bear some relation to the learners' perceived needs and interests.

Feedback and correction

It is often a delicate decision as to how to provide learners with feedback on their errors when their attention is primarily focused on the content of what they are saying, rather than on the way they are saying it. Interrupting learners 'in full flight' to give them corrections seems to run counter to the need to let them experience autonomy. If the teacher is constantly intervening to assist their performance, whether by providing unknown words or correcting their errors, they can hardly be said to be self-regulating. And it may have the counterproductive effect of inhibiting fluency by forcing learners' attention on to accuracy.

Nevertheless, many teachers feel uncomfortable about 'letting errors go', even in fluency activities, and there is support for the view that maintaining a **focus on form** – that is, on formal accuracy – is good for learners in the long run. It is important, therefore, that such a focus should be effected at minimal cost to the speaker's sense of being in control. In the following extract, the teacher's corrections, while explicit, are unobtrusive, and these are picked up by the learners with no real loss of fluency:

Learner 1:	And what did you do last weekend?
Learner 2:	On Saturday I went on my own to Canterbury, so I took a bus and I met [Learner 6] – he took the same bus to Canterbury. And in Canterbury I visited the Cathedral and all the streets near the Cathedral and I tried to find a pub where you don't see – where you don't see many tourists. And I find one
Teacher:	Found
Learner 2:	I found one where I spoke with two English women and we spoke about life in Canterbury or things and after I came back
Teacher:	Afterwards
Learner 2:	Afterwards I came back by bus too. And on Sunday what did you do?
Learner 1:	Oh, er, I stayed in home
Teacher:	At home
Learner 1:	On Sunday I stayed at home and watched the Wimbledon Final ...

In the above extract, the teacher's interventions are economical and effective, and the conversational flow is not threatened. However, it could be argued that such overt monitoring deprives the learners of opportunities to take more responsibility for their own monitoring and self-repair. This is especially the case with regard to their mistakes, as opposed to their errors. By **mistake** is meant the learners' momentary failure to apply what they already know, due mainly to the demands of online processing. An **error**, on the other hand, represents a gap in the speaker's knowledge of the system. Mistakes can usually be self-corrected, but errors cannot. A deft hint to the learner that they have used a present verb form instead of a past one, for example, may be all that is needed to encourage self-correction. And self-correction, even if prompted by the teacher, is one step nearer self-regulation and the ultimate goal of full autonomy.

Sometimes, however, the learner's message is simply unintelligible, and some kind of more obtrusive intervention is necessary to repair the breakdown. In this case, an intervention that is perceived by the learner as **repair** is likely to be less inhibiting than one that is perceived of as correction. Repair is facilitative, while correction can be construed negatively, as judgmental. For example, in this extract, the teacher's intervention takes the form of a conversational repair, one that is consistent with the meaning-orientation of the interaction:

Learner:	... so I phone the doctor and ask for a *consulta* ...
Teacher:	I'm sorry? A what?
Learner:	I ask for a, er, for see the doctor.
Teacher:	An appointment?
Learner:	Yes, ask for appointment

If it is the learners themselves who are interacting, it may be the case that the other learners can initiate the repair. This is more likely if the design of the task is such that mutual understanding is necessary if the task outcome is to be achieved. In a describe-and-draw task, for example, where one learner describes a picture to another, who has to reproduce it, a breakdown in communication should normally force some kind of repair process. Otherwise the task would never be completed. It is important, therefore, that learners are equipped with the language with which to initiate repair, such as *Sorry, could you say that again? I didn't get that* and *What do you mean, X?* Many teachers ensure these expressions are available to students by having them permanently displayed as posters on the classroom wall.

An alternative to on-the-spot correction is to postpone it until the end of the activity. This means that the teacher needs to keep a record of errors while the speaking activity is in progress. These can either be given to individual learners as 'feedback notes', or dealt with orally in open class. In either case, it is generally more motivating if the learner's successes as well as their failures are recorded. One way of doing this is in the form of a feedback sheet, as in this example:

Name: Teresa	
Task: Telling an anecdote	
Things I liked:	Points to note:
1 The bar was completely empty ... 2 description of the woman 3 use of past continuous: 'the bag was hanging on the chair ...'; 'You thought I was trying to ...' (but see 3 opposite)	1 sitting at a table (not 'on') 2 no one apart from us (not 'of') 3 we didn't pay attention (not 'take'), and better in continuous: 'we weren't paying attention' 4 she sit → she sat 5 she get up → she got up 6 to steal your wallet (not 'rob') 7 how can you think this of me (not 'from')
General comments: You established the situation and characters well, and used direct speech to dramatic effect. Watch irregular verbs in past! (sat, get etc). Also use 'said', not 'told', with direct speech: she said 'You thought I was ...' etc.	

Alternatively, recording learners on audio or video provides a useful record of their speech for subsequent analysis and improvement. As we saw in Chapter 4 (page 60), asking learners to make their own transcriptions of these recordings and to suggest ways of improving them yields positive results, both in terms of what they notice and also in terms of subsequent performances.

Presentations and talks

Whether or not learners will have to give presentations or talks in 'real life', the experience of standing up in front of their colleagues and speaking for a sustained turn is excellent preparation for real-life speaking. This is especially the case if they also have to respond to questions from the floor. The following ideas belong to this category of speech event:

Show-and-tell – asking learners to talk and answer questions about an object or image of special significance to them works well for all age groups and at all but the most elementary levels. Show-and-tell can be established as a regular feature of lessons, with learners taking turns and knowing in advance when their turn is due. The talk itself need be no more than two or three minutes, and unscripted, although the use of notes can be permitted. Extra time should be allowed for asking questions. Suggestions for topic areas can include such things as hobbies, sports, holidays, family, and work, but the focus should be on a specific object or image. For students who are unfamiliar with this format, it is a good idea if the teacher models a show-and-tell herself.

Did you read about ...? – this is a variant of 'show-and-tell' and can be done in small groups rather than to the whole class. The stimulus is 'something I read in the paper or heard on the news' rather than an object. If all learners know that this is an obligatory lesson starter, they are more likely to come prepared. In groups, they take turns to relate their news item to the rest of the group. The most interesting story in each group can then be told to the class as a whole.

Academic presentations – students who are studying English for academic purposes are likely to need preparation in giving academic presentations or conference papers. In advance of practising these skills in class, it may help to discuss the formal features of such genres as well as identifying specific language exponents associated with each stage. (Having an example presentation on videotape or audiotape would, of course, be extremely useful.) A checklist of features, along with useful expressions, can be displayed as a poster in the classroom, and this can be modified over time as students take turns giving their presentations and discussing their effectiveness. For example, a group of mixed native speaker and non-native speaker graduate students in Canada, who each had to give an oral academic presentation (OAP) about a research paper they had read, came up with the following key features of such presentations:

- The OAP should contain a concise summary, a thoughtful and well-balanced critique, and a list of relevant implications.
- Presenters should engage and evoke interest in the audience.
- Presenters should have an effective delivery style.
- Presenters should manage time well.

Business presentations – the same principle, that of peer presentations in conjunction with collaborative analysis and critical feedback, works effectively with business presentations as well. One way of reducing

the pressure of solo performance is to ask learners to work in pairs on the preparation of the presentation and to take turns in its delivery. It is important to allow a question-and-answer session at the end since this is invariably the most challenging stage of a presentation. The 'audience' should be given a little time at the end of the presentation to prepare their questions. This in turn could be followed by some discussion as to the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation. Alternatively, the presenters can be asked to reflect on, and evaluate, their own performance. The following checklist is a good example of how an evaluation could be structured. It comes as part of a sequence in which students practise the introduction stage of a presentation:

If possible record yourself. When you play back your introduction, use the checklist below to help you evaluate your presentation.

Checklist	***Yes / No***	***Example phrases***
■ Did you explain to the audience: – Who you are? – Why you are speaking?		
■ Did you include a statement of purpose?		
■ Did you include signposting?		
■ Did you relate the presentation to the needs of the audience?		
■ How did you involve the audience?		
■ Did your opening remarks include: – a participatory activity? – a question to the audience? – surprising / unusual facts?		

One problem with student presentations is the question of how to maintain audience interest. Setting the other students some kind of task is one way round this. A checklist, like the example above, could also serve equally well as a listening task. Alternatively, the other students could be set the task of coming up with at least three questions to ask, or of taking notes with a view to making a short summary of the presentation.

Stories, jokes, and anecdotes

Storytelling is a universal function of language and one of the main ingredients of casual conversation. (Remember the kedgeree story in Chapter 1?) Through their stories learners not only practise an essential skill, but they can also get to know one another: we are our stories. The neurologist Oliver Sacks, in *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat*, writes:

Each of us is a singular narrative, which is constructed continually, unconsciously by, through, and in us – through our perceptions, our feelings, our thoughts, our actions; and, not least, our discourse, our spoken narrations. Biologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives – we are each of us unique.

Narration has always been one of the main means of practising speaking in the classroom, although this used to take the form of having learners recount folk tales, or amusing or dramatic incidents based on a series of pictures. More recently, the value of encouraging learners to tell their own stories has been recognized, and coursebooks now include personalized narrating tasks, whether monologic or dialogic, as a matter of course. Two are shown on page 97 (1 and 2).

Other ideas for storytelling-based activities are:

Guess the lie – learners tell each other three short personal anecdotes, two of which are true in every particular, and the third of which is totally untrue (but plausible!). The listeners have to guess the lie – and give reasons for their guesses. They can be allowed to ask a limited number of questions after the story. It helps if the teacher models this activity in advance of the learners doing it.

A variant of this idea is to guess who a story originated from. Page 97 (3) shows how the idea is developed in a coursebook:

Insert the word – learners are each given a card with an unusual word or expression – perhaps one that has come up recently in class – which they keep secret. They then take turns telling each other an anecdote in which they incorporate their 'secret item' as unobtrusively as possible. At the end of each telling, the others have to guess what the word or expression was.

Chain story – in groups, the learners take turns to tell a story, each one taking over from, and building on, the contribution of their classmates, at a given signal from the teacher.

Party jokes – learners first each learn and rehearse a joke that has a narrative element. They then simulate a party, standing up and milling, and exchanging jokes in pairs or groups of three. They should first be taught some basic joke-framing expressions, such as *Did you hear the joke about …?* and *That reminds me of the joke about …* . The repeated practice that they get telling their jokes fulfils an important function of good speaking tasks. At the end of the activity the class can vote on the best joke.

Drama, role-play, and simulation

Speaking activities involving a drama element, in which learners take an imaginative leap out of the confines of the classroom, provide a useful springboard for real-life language use. Situations that learners are likely to encounter when using English in the real world can be simulated, and a greater range of registers can be practised than are normally available in classroom talk. For example, situations involving interactions with total strangers or requiring such face-threatening speech acts as complaining and refusing, can be simulated with relatively low risk. Formal language that would not normally occur in the classroom context can be practised. Moreover, simulation and artifice suit the temperament of certain learners, who may feel uncomfortable 'being themselves' in a second language. On the other hand, there are also learners who feel self-conscious performing in

Anecdote Think about a lucky or an unlucky experience you have had. You are going to tell your partner about it. Choose from the list below the things you want to talk about. Think about what you will say and what language you will need.

1

- ☐ Was it a lucky or unlucky experience?
- ☐ When did it happen?
- ☐ Where were you?
- ☐ Who were you with?
- ☐ What were you doing?
- ☐ What happened?
- ☐ Why was it lucky (or unlucky)?
- ☐ How did you feel afterwards?

2

4 MAKING CONVERSATION

The first time

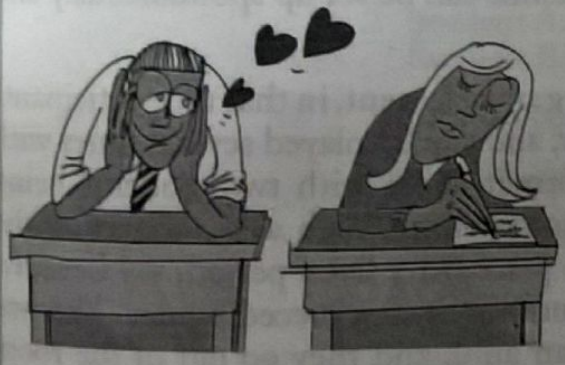
In pairs, A choose two 'first times'. Tell B about what happened. B listen and ask for more information. Swap roles.

A *I'm going to tell you about the first time I drove a car. I was staying in the country with my uncle and he had an old Renault 4…*

B *How old were you?*

The first time I…

bought a record or CD
went to a live concert
smoked a cigarette
fell in love
travelled by plane
went abroad
drove a car
saw a lot of snow
earned some money
had to go to hospital



prepare your story

3

5 **Think!** You're going to tell a partner about a good or bad shopping experience. Read the checklist.

checklist

- Use the questions in the framework to help organize your story.
- Use a dictionary or ask your teacher to help you with new words.
- Make notes, but don't write the full story.
- When you've finished, practise telling the story to yourself. This will help your confidence.

tell your story

6 Work with a partner. Tell each other your stories. At the end, make sure you understand each other's stories. Use the phrases in the **natural English** box if necessary.

asking for clarification

I didn't understand the bit about …
Could you explain the bit about … again?
I'm sorry but I didn't understand what / why / when / how …

7 You're now going to tell your partner's story. Tell it as if it's your own story. You may need to make small changes to sound realistic. Your partner should correct any factual mistakes you make.

8 Work with a new partner. Tell the two stories, without saying which one is yours. Your new partner can ask you questions. At the end, they have to decide which was your story, and why.

front of their peers, especially if this involves a degree of improvisation, and care has to be exercised in choosing and setting up such activities so as not to make even more demands on them than speaking in another language normally requires. Just as in the real theatre, a preparation stage, including rehearsal, is generally recommended in advance of public performance.

A distinction can be made between role-plays and simulations. The former involve the adoption of another 'persona', as when students pretend to be an employer interviewing a job applicant or celebrities mingling at a party. Information about their roles can be supplied in the form of individualized role-cards. For example:

Father You are an ex-hippie and have brought up your son (now 18) according to your progressive, left-wing values.	**Mother** You often have to mediate between your husband and your 18-year-old son.	**Son** You have decided to join the army, and you are now going to tell your parents.

In a simulation, on the other hand, students 'play' themselves in a simulated situation: they might be stuck in a lift or phoning to arrange an outing, for example. A more elaborate simulation might involve the joint planning and presentation of a business plan. Drama is the more general term, encompassing both role-play and simulation, as well as other types of activities, such as play-reading, recitation, and improvisation.

What follows is a selection of drama activity types, chosen because they are potentially highly language productive, can be adapted to different levels of proficiency and for different topics, and because they allow learners to experience autonomy in the speaking skill. They also have the added advantage of requiring few or no materials, and hence can be set up spontaneously and in most teaching contexts:

Alibis – this classic activity has a game element, in that the participants have to try and outwit each other, and can be played several times with no loss of interest. The basic format starts with two students being 'accused' of having committed some crime, such as a robbery in the institution where the class takes place, in a fixed period, say between the hours of 10 and 11 in the morning on the preceding day. The two 'accused' then have to establish an alibi, and they go out of the room to do this. The alibi needs to account for their actions only during the time period in question (anything before or after is irrelevant), and it is important to establish that they were together for all that time. While the accused contrive their alibi, the rest of the class can prepare generic questions, with the teacher prompting, if necessary, of the type: *What were you doing …? What did you do next? Did you meet anyone? What did you say? How much did it cost? Who paid?* etc. The accused are then led in, one at a time, and have to answer the questions put to them. (It helps to establish the rule that they are not allowed to claim that they

don't remember.) Any significant discrepancy in their answers means that they are, of course, guilty.

With large classes, the activity can also be done in groups, each group playing their own version of the game. Alternatively (and so long as they are out of earshot), the two accused can be interviewed simultaneously by two different groups, and then exchange places.

A variant is 'Green Card', in which immigration officers interview, separately, two candidates who claim to be members of the same family (in which case, they have to answer questions about the other members of their immediate family – their name, age, and appearance) or who claim to be partners (in which case, they have to answer questions about their daily routine). Here is a coursebook version of the same idea.

Get talking

9 In groups of 4, roleplay an immigration interview.

Students A and B: Turn to page 86.
Students C and D: Turn to page 89.

Lesson 38, Exercise 9, Students A and B

1 You are a married couple.
B is from another country. Immigration officers are going to interview you and you have five minutes to prepare for the interview. Work together to make sure you give the same information about:

- how long B has been in the country
- how long you've known each other
- where you met
- your wedding
- your jobs
- what you do in your free time

2 Student A: Answer Student C's questions.
Student B: Answer Student D's questions.

3 Discuss your interviews. Do you think you gave the same answers?

Lesson 38, Exercise 9, Students C and D

1 You are immigration officers.
A and B are married. B is from another country and you don't think it's a real marriage. You are going to interview the couple and you have five minutes to prepare for the interview. Work together to prepare questions to ask them. You will ask both A and B the same questions, about:

- how long B has been in the country
- how long they've known each other
- where they met
- their wedding
- their jobs
- what they do in their free time

2 Student C: Ask Student A your questions.
Student D: Ask Student B your questions.

3 Compare A and B's answers. Are they telling the truth?

Another variant of 'Alibis' is 'UFO', in which two people are interviewed separately about an alleged encounter with aliens.

Shopping around – this role-play has an inbuilt repetitive element, and is a variant of the 'carousel' idea (see page 87), in which pairs of students visit every 'shop' before making a decision as to which one to patronize. The class is divided into two: one half are the customers and the other are the providers. These are further subdivided into pairs. The situation itself can vary to suit whatever theme is appropriate. For example, the customers might be parents looking for a particular kind of school for their special needs child; the providers represent different schools. In their pairs, the parents first decide what features the school they are looking for should have. Meanwhile, also working in pairs, the schools each devise a policy, with regard to such things as discipline, the curriculum, uniforms, sports, and so on. (It is important, however, that the school fees are the same for each school: the mere cost shouldn't be a deciding factor.) When everyone is ready, each set of parents interviews one of the schools. They then move round one, and interview the next school, and so on, until all the parent pairs have interviewed all the school pairs. The parents are then ready to make their decision as to which school they prefer, while the schools can decide which parents they prefer. Each group reports their decision – and the reasons – to the class.

Variants include: choosing a package holiday; choosing a language course; choosing flatmates; choosing a wedding venue; and so on. A version of this basic format can also be used to role-play job interviews, as in this example:

Job interviews

1 Which of the following suggestions about conducting a job interview do you agree with? Add some of your own.

a) There should be more than one interviewer.
b) The interviewer should sit behind a desk.
c) The interviewer should make notes while the interviewee is speaking.

2 In groups of four, choose one of these advertisements and discuss the points for and against the job.

ADMINISTRATOR

Administrator with experience and word processing skills required to work in our friendly but busy school office. An interest in Shiatsu and Natural Health an advantage. Please send full CV to: The British School of Shiatsu, 188 Old Street, London EC1 9BP.

GOLDEN SKI HOLIDAYS

seeks mature person to run chalet holiday programme in Alps. Outgoing personality and ability to work hard without supervision essential. Good cooking and housekeeping skills an advantage. Modest salary but accommodation and meals provided and abundant skiing time. Apply giving full details to: Golden Ski Holidays Ltd, 2 Ridge Street, Aldershot, Hants.

NURSERY NURSE

Experienced, qualified person required to fill vacancy for full-time nursery nurse. Duties include special responsibility for two-and-a-half to four-year-olds at private nursery. 40 hour working week. Apply in writing to: The Principal, Phoenix Nursery, Pond Lane, Guildford, Surrey GU1 3DD.

Each of you is a candidate for the job your group has chosen. Decide on:
- your qualifications (e.g. university degree, specialised training).
- your experience (e.g. with computers, a similar organisation, children).
- your qualities (e.g. enthusiasm, patience, administrative skill).

3 The interview panel will consist of the three people in the group not being interviewed.

a) Arrange the chairs.
b) Take turns to be interviewed. The candidates should sound interested and enthusiastic. The interviewers should try to find out the candidates' strengths and weaknesses.
c) Vote for who you think should get the job.

The Inquiry – an inquiry has been set up to gather evidence and opinions about some miscarriage of justice or consumer complaint. Different interest groups are represented, and they put their case to a team of independent investigators in an open forum. The situation might be a disastrous package holiday, a housing estate that is plagued with problems, a badly governed village, and so on. After the situation has been established, the different interest groups brainstorm their problems, while those responsible try to anticipate these and muster counterarguments. The panel of arbitrators – two or three students – prepares questions to ask the complainants. Each interest group then puts its case, and time is allowed for the groups to counter each other's arguments. Finally, the arbitrators make a ruling.

Variant: the same format can be used for 'The Tender', in which different interest groups submit their proposals for a project. The project might be the development of an open space in the middle of a town, or how best to provide energy for a village, or the design of a commemorative stamp or monument, for example. 'The Heart' is another variation, in which representatives of patients needing life-saving surgery make their case: profiles of each candidate will need to be prepared.

The Soap – learners plan, rehearse, and perform (and, if possible film) an episode from a soap opera. The soap opera could be based on a well-known local version, or on a selection of magazine pictures of people who become the 'characters'. The advantage of using the soap opera format is that learners can draw on a shared stock of melodramatic situations but are not compelled to come up with a clever ending. And, of course, they can continue the story by inventing subsequent episodes.

With regard to this last idea, Charlyn Wessels, an EFL teacher in Scotland, describes how she structures a whole term's work around drama techniques, culminating in the production of a full-length play based on the class's improvisations. One such play was a soap opera, generated by the learners themselves through brainstorming activities. Here, for example, is the 'relationship tree' the class developed for the plot of the soap opera:

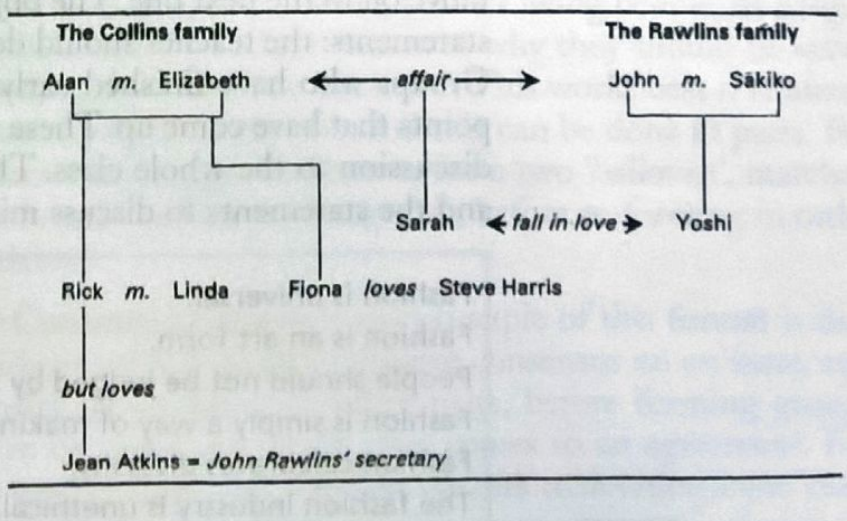


Figure 2: One group's relationship tree for Soap Opera

Students write detailed profiles of the characters they are going to play, and then the story is built up through a series of improvisations and scripted. Work is done on pronunciation as well as using drama techniques to improve performance. After the final performance one student commented, 'I've improved my English, had fun, and I've got to know my friends much better – what more can I ask of a course?'

Discussions and debates

Many teachers would agree that the best discussions in class are those that arise spontaneously, either because of something personal that a learner reports or because a topic or a text in the coursebook triggers some debate. Here, for example, a teacher describes how one such discussion erupted in a class of Catalan teenagers:

> I was trying to get attention at the beginning of the class but two of the girls were so deeply engrossed in a conversation in Catalan that it was proving even more difficult than usual. Finally, I said to these two girls that if their conversation was really that interesting they should tell the rest of the students, in English, what they were talking about. One of the girls proceeded to tell the class about a girl at her school who was wreaking havoc by telling lies about people and generally being very destructive. The rest of the students listened with good attention, then asked questions, made suggestions, and the conversation developed for the next twenty minutes or so.

In this case, the teacher knew how to take advantage of the students' concerns, and turn this into a discussion activity in English. In the absence of such opportunities, however, it is useful to have a store of techniques for setting up discussions in a more formal way. Here are some generic discussion formats.

Discussion cards – the teacher prepares in advance sets of cards (one for each group) on which are written statements relating to a pre-selected topic. In their groups, one student takes the first card, reads it aloud, and they then discuss it for as long as they need, before taking the next card, and so on. If a particular statement doesn't interest them, they can move on to the next one. The object is not necessarily to discuss all the statements: the teacher should decide at what point to end the activity. Groups who have finished early can prepare a summary of the main points that have come up. These summaries can be used to open up the discussion to the whole class. The topic may, for example, be fashion, and the statements to discuss might include the following:

> Fashion is universal.
> Fashion is an art form.
> People should not be judged by what they wear.
> Fashion is simply a way of making people spend money.
> Fashion celebrates diversity.
> The fashion industry is unethical.
> etc.