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Transforming the Whole Class into Gossiping Groups

THE MOST DISTINCTIVE TRAIT THAT SETS HUMANS APART FROM ANIMALS is the ability to talk. But people talk only when there is something to talk about. Talking about the weather, prices, health, travel, and entertainment are just a few of the various topics that people often address in their daily conversation. Generalizing about the nature of communication, Harmer states that "[s]peakers say things because they want something to happen as a result of what they say. They may want to charm their listeners; they may want to give some information or express pleasure. They may decide to be rude or to flatter, to agree or complain. In each of these cases they are interested in achieving a communicative purpose" (1997:46). On the role of listeners, he says, "people listen to language because they want to find out what the speaker is going to say—in other words, what ideas they are conveying, and what effect they wish the communication to have" (Harmer 1997:47).

Oral fluency classes benefit when the activities used in the classroom reflect these basic characteristics of effective communication. The job of the present-day language teacher, therefore, has become all the more challenging, as improving students' capacities to use the language meaningfully largely depends on the teacher's ingenuity and hard work.

Gossiping as a universal language function

The creation of gossiping groups was born of my desire to give extended oral practice to students who remain rather inhibited, in spite of having a working knowledge of grammar. In other words, it is an attempt to encourage less fluent students to talk with inspiration. The idea, in fact, stems from Chafe's notion of three types of involvement in conversation: "self-involvement of the speaker, interpersonal involvement between speaker and hearer, and involvement of the speaker with what is being talked about" (cited in Tannen 1996:11). One of the most common types of discourse that people of all ages and eras have engaged in, gossip is very much characterized by its interactive nature. In Bateson's words, gossip "sends a metamessage of rapport between the communicators, who thereby experience that they share communicative conventions and inhabit the same world of discourse" (cited in Tannen 1996:13).

Few people can resist gossiping, although the amount of gossip they engage in might depend on what type of people they are. Gossipers tend to speak critically and disparagingly about people who are not present. The familiarity of this tendency "makes the discourse and its meaning seem coherent, and allows for the elaboration of meaning through the play of familiar patterns" (Tannen 1996:13). Therefore, gossiping can be claimed as a universal language function.

This article explores one possible way to exploit our human weakness for gossip to provide language fluency practice. It attempts to show how certain interpersonal exchanges can be encouraged by exploiting our natural proclivity for talking about the people around us. The activities presented in this article stress the social aspect of learning and are intended to provide the learners with opportunities to talk and to listen with a communicative purpose in mind, thereby helping them to improve their fluency in English.

An acknowledgement

Generally considered negative and malicious, gossiping may be viewed as an inappropriate classroom activity by some teachers. Some people might even regard the idea of having students gossip about their teacher (one of the activities presented in this article) as preposterous. I might have balked at this idea had there not been a very strong rapport between me and my students. The use of myself as material for gossip is only to point out that one does not have to look far for material, and that teaching and learning can be fun if the teacher is a good sport.

Successful teaching and learning depends, to a certain extent, on the understanding and cooperation between the teacher and the students. Therefore, the gossiping activities that have proved successful with my students might not produce good results for other teachers who have reservations about exposing themselves to students' gossiping. If this is the case, choosing someone else for students to gossip about may be a better idea.

Whom or what to be gossiped about?

It might be embarrassing for the students if they are asked to gossip face to face about someone whom they all personally know. In some cases, they may even exchange angry words if the person chosen as the subject for gossiping has relatives or friends in the class. On the other hand, choosing some imaginary person may not produce inspired gossip, as "meaning and mental images come only when connection is made with the learners' own world of experience" (Lindstromberg 1990:xi). Yet we are not devoid of raw materials. Newspapers, television, and radio can provide us with news about some of the meanest people on earth.

Depending on the students' tastes, the person chosen to gossip about—the raw material in our situation—can be a movie star, athlete, politician, leader of a country, criminal, someone blacklisted by history, or even a fictional character. If the learners are mature and understanding, the person to be gossiped about may even be chosen from the class. The main purpose of this activity is only to help

learners speak with fluency in a meaningful context. Gossip is an example of how a number of interpersonal exchanges can be made by making use of our tendency to talk about the people around us.

Gossip activity 1

The students I did this activity with are upper-intermediate level students studying at Assumption University in Thailand. Many of the learners were shy, though fairly well grounded in grammar. Their ages ranged between 18 and 22. The person chosen to be gossiped about for the very first time was myself, their teacher, though the "facts" given to them for gossiping were meant only for fun. For the sake of effectiveness, each gossip group did not exceed three members—an appropriate size for gossiping. Groups for the first round of gossiping were formed on the basis of friendship among the members, so as to produce the most inspired gossip.

It was hoped that students, in the process of gossiping and using the information about me, would get motivated and start using a variety of tenses, positive and negative statements, questions, and exclamations whenever the occasion arose. For example, one student might start the gossip with a statement and a question: "San is very short, but he loves tall women. Don't you think he is foolish?" Another might reply with a statement and an exclamation: "But the funny thing is that he has never been in love. No woman loves him!"

The lesson plan

In order that all the participants might have sufficient opportunity to express themselves, I prolonged this activity by leading the students through the following three stages.

Stage 1
Step 1: Explain to the class the nature of the activity and get the participants to sit in groups of three.
Step 2: Distribute a small piece of paper containing three different gossip items to each group member. (See the appendix for examples of the gossip items used.)
Step 3: Have participants talk and listen to the gossip items in their groups.

Stage 2
Step 1: Form new groups of three.
Step 2: Have students gossip again using all the information they gained in the previous round. In this stage of the activity, however, they are not allowed to look at written information. They must rely on their memory for whatever they want to gossip about.

Stage 3
Step 1: Show the following piece of information to the class on the overhead projector.

> Obituary
> Unexpected Death of San
> San, the founder of the Akyab Lonely Hearts Club, breathed his last breath while watching a pretty girl come towards him with a red rose in her right hand and a handkerchief in her left hand. The funeral procession will ——————— .

Step 2: Give the class 3 minutes to reflect on this dramatic change of fate.
Step 3: Have two fluent students come to the front of the classroom to discuss the topic "The San We Used to Know." (These students should be chosen before the activity begins.) The rest of the class listens in on their conversation.

Classroom atmosphere

The first phase of the activity took nearly 10 minutes. Some students chuckled and others grinned as they gradually got absorbed in the activity. But one noticeable thing—a very unnatural phenomenon in our situation—was that nobody remained passive. They listened and talked in turns, all were curious to know what their peers had to say about the teacher and were eager to tell the others about the information they had. My role was going around the class to check if communication was really taking place and to give assistance to the students should they need it.

More active participation could be seen among students as they began the second round of gossip (in stage 2) when they used all the information they had gained in the previous round, thus creating as vivid an image of the gossiped-about person as possible. Knowing that what one participant knew about the gossiped-about person was not known by another participant, each student contributed eagerly whatever s/he knew to the group. Emboldened by the experience they had gained from the first round of gossip, some students began to add made-up gossip items

into their talk, thus further enlivening the classroom atmosphere. This activity took about 15 minutes but might have continued longer if I had not intervened to introduce the third stage of the activity.

The purpose of the last activity was to give the rest of the class a chance to watch two more fluent students while they were engaged in a conversation. Although no particular instruction was given as to how that conversation should develop, they built their discussion around the mysterious nature of San's death, and kept it going using whatever idea struck them at that moment. The rest of the class watched and listened, motivated by this model of their peers.

Gossip activity 2

I realize that this gossiping activity may not be appreciated by a number of teachers because they might feel it is tantamount to making an exhibition of oneself. This feeling has never occurred to me because my students are well aware of their situation as well as my intention in designing this activity, which is to encourage those who have a basic knowledge of English grammar but are shy or reluctant to talk.

Teachers who are adventurous but do not want to go to extremes may create a less "tragic" situation than the death of San, such as resigning from the school and leaving the city in disgrace or something equally scandalous. Another way to use a gossiping activity is with literature. Students can gossip about characters in short stories or novels they have read rather than real people. Students' feelings regarding the gossiped-about character will be genuine even though the person is not.

After successfully using the first gossip activity, my students read a simplified version of Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*. I exploited this opportunity and asked them to do gossip groups about Heathcliff's character in the story. I was certain they would have differing interpretations and opinions.

The lesson plan

Stage 1
Lead the students in a brief discussion and review of the plot.

This elicitation should last a few minutes, only enough time for all the students to have the short story or novel in mind for the rest of the activity. One thing I purposely avoid doing in this stage is asking them their opinions about the main characters. This step is only meant to whet the students' appetite for more talk about the characters.

Stage 2
Have the students talk about the main character, in this case Heathcliff, with their partners.

In this stage, students were allowed to form their own groups, and the size of the group was not limited. I had informed them in advance of the activity, and some students came to class with the prepared gossip items. Whether or not they came prepared, their language was natural during the gossiping session. The subject matter was engrossing because it concerned two of the most elemental human emotions: love and hate. Every word of their conversations reflected their contempt for Heathcliff's mistreatment of other characters in the story. It was interesting to find that some of the gossipers seemed to defend Heathcliff at some point during the conversation. For instance, when someone said that Heathcliff's love for Catherine was not love but madness, another spoke in favour of Heathcliff's unquestionable love for her, reasoning that it was his bitter childhood that forced him to behave strangely. Of course, the students' language was not faultless, but they spoke with more ease and fluency than they had during oral activities designed by textbook writers.

Stage 3
Ask each gossiping group to prepare for an oral presentation entitled "How I Understand Heathcliff."

By the time stage 2 was over, students were so full of various feelings for Heathcliff that they were ready to do this third task. Each group jotted down the ideas the members suggested, then one representative from each group read their notes to the rest of the class. No one raised questions after the reading because the students were still not confident enough to do so in front of the whole class. However, they listened avidly, which demonstrated that the activity was in agreement with Harmer's statements about the nature of communication.

Conclusion

The gossiping activities presented in this article are not intended to teach students how to speak. Rather, they are attempts to help

students speak more fluently by making use of their feelings about certain people. They are drawn into the first activity for the sake of fun. In the second activity, they participate eagerly because they are already familiar with the purpose of the gossiping and they want to show how much they know and feel about the fictional literary character.

Though accuracy and formal correctness cannot be achieved through these suggested activities, they definitely worked well with my students, whose fluency in English was below par. Agreeing, disagreeing, and siding with classmates who shared their feelings may have lowered the students' affective filters. Through their gossiping, my students were able to tap into their largely passive grammatical knowledge and extend their conversational range.

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APPENDIX

Some of the gossip items used in gossip activity 1:

never keeps promises; never good to friends; too fond of beautiful girls; always forgets to return borrowed money; interested in sleeping and eating only; stays aloof; stingy; never neat and tidy; very lazy; knows little, but very boastful; looks down on people who cannot speak English; not helpful; no sense of duty; assumes no responsibility for his family; never admits his faults; envies people around him; very greedy and selfish; likes flattery; does not believe in any religion; very short, but loves tall women; very ugly, no woman loves him; likes gambling; drinks like a fish; always late for appointments; has no sympathy for the poor and uneducated; always pessimistic.

From Page to Stage…
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A P P E N D I X   1

In this section of the script prepared by the students, Jack challenges Ralph for leadership of the boys and suggests that he would be a better leader.

Jack: Who thinks that Ralph should not be chief? Come on, hands up. Ralph is not fit to be chief. He can't sing, he can't hunt, all he wants is to keep the damn fire going. (Piggy grabs the conch.)

Piggy: Hang on. I've got the conch. That means I get to speak. Isn't that right, Ralph? We have to keep the fire going to be rescued. What would the grown ups think?

Jack: Shut up, Fatty, you're no good. You're all babies. I'm not going to play any longer. Not with you. I'm not going to be part of Ralph's lot. I'm going off by myself. He can catch his own pigs. Anyone who wants to hunt can come with me. Who's coming?

Roger: Me, I will join you in your hunt.

Jack: Great, Roger, anyone else? Erica?

Erica: No!

Roger: Ah, you're all a bunch of idiots. You should listen to Jack. He is the right chief. He can sing a high C, and Ralph can't. Show us, Jack.

Jack: (singing) Ahhh.

Ralph: That's got nothing to do with who is a better chief.

Roger: You're just jealous.

Piggy: But Jack, I've got the conch. You're breaking the rules!
          (Jack punches Piggy, grabs his glasses, and runs off. Several boys follow)

Ralph: Jack, no! Wait. Come back!

Piggy: (crying) I can't see a thing. I need my specs.

Ralph: When the sun comes down, he'll be back. Don't worry.

A P P E N D I X   2

Criteria for assessment
Script (worth 30 of 60 total points)
   1. Content
   Does the script reflect an ability to discriminate between essential and nonessential events in the plot? Does it reflect an understanding of the themes of the novel? Does it include references to important details? Is the script interesting and creative?
   2. Format
   Does the script successfully present the novel in the drama genre? Does it reflect the author's style in the novel?
Performance (worth 30 of 60 total points)
   1. Staging (group assessment)
   Do the movements, blocking, and visual effects on stage convey a sense of where and when the story takes place?
   2. Acting (individual assessment)
   Is a sense of the character effectively conveyed through movement, gestures, and expressions? Is a sense of the relationship between the characters conveyed?
   3. Speaking (individual assessment)
   Is the voice well projected, with clear pronunciation? Is expression conveyed through varying pitch and pace? Does the actor listen to the other characters?