

Communicative Activities for Middle School Classrooms

Middle school teachers often attend seminars and workshops where the advantages of communicative activities are discussed at great length. Teachers may even enjoy doing the communicative activities themselves during a teacher training session. However, many teachers are afraid to use communicative activities in the classroom. In theory teachers often believe that communicative activities are what students need, but in practice it can be difficult to implement a communicative approach with antsy middle school students.

The purpose of this article is to share with teachers some activities that I have applied in my classroom and that my students enjoyed. The objective of these activities is to make students practice their oral skills with interesting, motivating topics that allow them to talk about themselves and others and to express their points of view. The idea is to get them to talk, which is something that middle school students love to do. When the activities are carefully presented, students will be eager to use their English language skills, which, of course, is the point.

Tips for using communicative activities

It is demanding for teachers to apply communicative activities to the middle school classroom context in part because middle school students are known for misinterpreting instructions. To ensure that students understand the activities, it is important to:

- Give one instruction at a time.
- Make sure that the instructions are very clear. Note that the sample communicative activities listed below have been broken down into simple steps that students can follow.
- Teach students how to work in pairs before having them work in small groups.
- Make sure that there are predetermined signals for quieting students in case they get too noisy. For example, you may want to hold up your right hand as a signal for everyone else to hold up their right hands as well and to stop talking. This way you will be able to tell students to be quiet or to give the next instruction without trying to yell over the noise.

Time Pie

Purpose: To practice oral skills by talking about activities that are meaningful to the students.

Number of people: First individually and then in pairs

Materials: a sheet of paper, pencil, colors, calculator, and compass

First of all, the teacher elicits from students the variety of activities they do during the week and the weekend; for example: sleeping, homework, email, transportation, phone, family time, friends, meals, etc.

Students' participation:

1. Students use the compass to draw 14 circles on one sheet of paper.
2. Students then divide the 14 circles into 12-hour clocks (two clocks for each day of the week). Students then mark off and label "pie slices" of the clock to indicate how they spend 24 hours. They can do this for a weekday or weekend day, whichever they prefer.
3. Have students draw four columns on the second piece of paper. They should make at least eight rows.

4. Students label the columns as shown below.

Day of Week	Activities	Hours	Percentage

5. In the first column, students write the days of the week.
6. Students copy the activities from their clocks and put them in the boxes under the word *Activity*.

7. Have students divide the total hours of each activity by 168 hours (total hours in a week, $24 \times 7 = 168 = 100\%$ of the time during the week) in order to obtain the percentage of hours spent doing that activity during the week.
8. After adding up the hours for each activity and finding its percentage, students must then add up all the percentages to get a total of 100%.
9. Have students draw a big circle in the centre of a sheet of paper and then divide it according to the corresponding percentage of each activity. Each wedge of this pie chart can be colored and labeled to differentiate it from the others.
10. Next, students are paired with a partner and discuss the following items using their charts as speaking guides.
 - a. Which activity did you spend the most time doing?
 - b. Did you like that activity? Why or why not?
 - c. Which activity did you spend the least time doing? Did you like it? Why or why not?
 - d. What did you learn about how you spend your time?
 - e. Do you want to change anything about how you spend your time?

After the practice in pairs gets to its end, the teacher may motivate the class to ask questions or make comments about the activity.

Symbol Portraits

Purpose: To have students practice their oral skills by talking about a person or character who is meaningful to them.

Number of people: Groups of 4–5 students

Materials: Biographical information about different characters from magazines, the Internet and/or books, poster board, and markers

1. Explain to students that a portrait is a picture of someone. Tell them that they are going to make symbol portraits of their favorite person. They are going to make a poster with symbols about the person whom they chose.
2. Divide students into teams of four or five.

3. Students select a famous person, either alive or no longer living. They must select someone they know a lot about or can learn a lot about.
4. Students make a list of fifteen things about the person. They can use history books, newspaper or magazine articles, or the Internet to come up with a list of facts about the person. For example, if the person were Abraham Lincoln students could put together a list such as:
 - a. This person was a man.
 - b. This person lived in the United States.
 - c. This person was a president.
 - d. This person was shot and killed.
 - e. This person's picture is on a U.S. coin called a penny.
 - f. This person was born in 1809.
 - g. This person was born in Kentucky.
 - h. This person was married to a woman named Mary Todd.
 - i. This person had four sons.
 - j. This person gave a special speech called the Gettysburg Address.
 - k. This person was killed at a theatre.
 - l. This person was killed by a man named John Wilkes Booth.
 - m. This person was the 16th president of the United States.
 - n. This person loved to read.
 - o. This person was killed in 1865.
5. Next students go through their list and discuss symbols that could represent each item on their list. For example, for item a, to indicate that "he was a man," students might draw a stick figure of a man.
6. Students decide on one symbol for each item and write the symbols on scratch paper.
7. Students take the 15 agreed-upon symbols and draw them on the poster board.
8. When the posters are completed, students use them to facilitate their group discussions. Each student tells three things about the person, using the symbols as prompts. Students are not allowed to look back at their notes during the discussion. (If there are four stu-

dents in the group, then three of the four students present four items and one student presents just three items.)

9. The team that has been able to remember all of the items correctly using the symbols wins. Note that more than one team can win.

Conclusion

I recommend using various communicative activities in the middle school classroom no matter the language level of the students. The point here is to provide the structure necessary to make learners feel comfortable. Little by little, the whole class will be involved, and teachers will be delighted with students' performance and the results of using activities like those described here. In the end, learners and teachers will have fun!

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