

Evaluating Communicative Language by Using Creative Dialogues

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"The (delicious) food" (See prompts in Figure 1.)

Students need opportunities to be creative and express themselves while learning a new language, during both classroom activities and tests at the end of a term or unit. A focus of my practice when assessing students' knowledge is to use creative dialogue techniques as a way to prevent students from simply repeating a given dialogue they had studied or prepared. But how can we as teachers motivate students to interact creatively as we evaluate their learning progress?

To answer this question, I will present an interactive evaluation method I have used with my upper-beginner and intermediate students in communicative English courses. This method—which can also be used to

give students general practice—draws from interactive oral tests I have used and is an attempt to make students use language within a communicative context. In the process, students exchange information and do not use language predictably, enabling them to converse while being assessed or while practicing.

DESCRIPTION OF THE METHOD

This method has an interactional goal; its primary purpose is for students to exchange feelings, impressions, and beliefs with a partner or partners. The method immerses students in a communicative context—a role play—while giving them an opportunity to use vocabulary and grammar structures they

have learned up to that point in the course. I have used this method for evaluation in classes where the students had used interactive dialogues during lessons, so they had experience with the overall format.

In this example, the grammar focus is on superlatives. I want the students to put the grammatical forms into practice, using them correctly and appropriately. In this instance, students work in pairs; both students act as if they are foreigners who meet while visiting Brazil, and they express their opinions about the country. An important aspect of this method is that I provide pieces of information for students to incorporate into their speech during their conversation, and their job is to include that information in the role play.

PREPARATION

As a teacher, you do not need to prepare a lot of material in advance. You can cut out strips with the information students will use in their creative dialogues (Figure 1), or you can

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| The (famous) attraction |
| The (beautiful) natural feature |
| The (cheap) way to travel around the country |
| The (comfortable) place to stay |
| The (good) souvenir to buy |
| The (nice) shopping area |
| The (nice) places to eat |
| The (bad) thing to do |
| The (delicious) food |
| The (interesting) thing to do in the evening |
| The (boring) place to visit |
| The (convenient) place to stay |
| The (populous) city |
| The (good) place to enjoy nightlife |
| The (good) time of the year to visit |
| The (adventurous) thing to do |

Figure 1. Suggested prompts (students must provide superlative forms)

simply write the information on small slips of paper. Note that the suggested adjectives are in parentheses; when students get the slip of paper, they must incorporate the information into the conversation naturally while using the superlative form of the adjective. You can adapt these items or create others to fit your context.

Each student needs a partner. Pairing students up randomly provides a realistic interaction setting, but you might choose to pair students up in another way. Keep in mind that in this format, each student must use his or her interaction skills to engage in a conversation with the partner, similar to a communicative dialogue encountered outside the classroom. A dialogue previously prepared by the students therefore should not be used for these evaluations.

PROCEDURE

1. The first time you use this method, allow students to join their partners, and then explain the directions. Your directions might sound something like this: “Today we are going to do an improvisation activity. You and your partner will pretend to be foreigners visiting Brazil, and you are meeting each other for the first time. First, you will introduce yourselves to each other, and then I will give one of you a piece of paper. The student who receives the paper must look at what is written there and include the information on the paper in the conversation. Today, each piece of paper has a phrase with an adjective. But, since we have been studying superlative forms, you must use the superlative form of the adjective in your conversation. For example, if I give you a piece of paper that says, ‘the (interesting) place,’ you could ask your partner, ‘What is the most interesting place you visited in Brazil?’”
2. Let the students start! In each pair, students decide who is Student 1 and who is Student 2. Student 1 opens the



“The (adventurous) thing to do” (See prompts in Figure 1.)

conversation by introducing himself or herself, followed by Student 2.

As Student 2 finishes his or her introduction, give Student 1 the first piece of paper. Student 1 looks at the information on the paper and tries to use it in the conversation by asking Student 2 a question using a superlative form of the adjective. Student 2 answers the question. Note that Student 1 has to form a superlative while creating the question, and Student 2 has to judge whether the form Student 1 has supplied is correct while answering. If Student 2 feels the form is not correct, he or she should try to use the correct form in the answer to the question.

3. Give a piece of paper to Student 2, who forms a question for Student 1 to answer. The teacher can continue to give Student 1 or Student 2 more pieces of paper to extend the dialogue, depending on how long the teacher would like the students to talk. Students make questions and responses using the new information.

When I introduced this concept in my class, I found my students were a little nervous when trying to include the information in their conversations, but they grew more confident as they became used to the interactive format. That is why it is a good idea to let students practice with this method before you use it for assessment.

VARIATIONS

You can limit the number of information exchanges students will use during the conversation, or you can choose different pieces of information for each pair. Depending on the skill level of the class, the dialogue can also be extended for longer exchanges. You can prepare a situation where more than two students talk together or where students act out a dialogue with different roles, such as a resident and an international visitor.

With large groups, or if you are not comfortable with the idea of giving students pieces of paper while they are conversing, you could give a set of prompts to Student 1 and a different set to Student 2. You could also give both students the same list of prompts and let them choose what they want to ask and when they want to ask it. Providing sets of prompts to students gives them more control over the conversation and lets more pairs of students practice speaking at the same time, allowing you to evaluate the pairs while they practice, although that would not be practical if your purpose is only assessment.

You might also have a group of three students peer-evaluate one another. In this scenario, you do not participate. One student assumes the role of the “teacher,” providing the pieces of information to the other two students, who interact with each other. When the two students finish interacting, the three students rotate within the group, changing which student is the “teacher” and which two students interact. At the end, the students give each other feedback by using a simple rubric. Students can discuss any disagreements about correct forms or other language items; unresolved language points can be brought

to the whole class so they can be reviewed together. You should encourage students to provide clear explanations of what their classmates did well and constructive feedback about where their classmates might improve. You could also ask students to self-report on their performance and give a copy of this feedback to you.

The examples presented above are for evaluation of the students' knowledge of superlatives. You can adapt the method to the specific part of speech or grammar that students are working on. Examples include verb tenses, quantifiers, prepositions, pronouns, and conjunctions. The following list gives examples of dialogue information for students to use for practice with or evaluation of the simple past tense or present perfect tense.

| | |
|---------------------|-------------------|
| visit a museum | dance to music |
| drive to work | take medicine |
| run for exercise | read a book |
| watch a movie | go on vacation |
| drive a car | study for an exam |
| travel abroad | walk by a lake |
| eat at a restaurant | fly to a new city |

A student's question could be, "Have you visited a museum?" An answer might be, "Yes, I have visited the Getty Museum and Getty Villa." In this example, the student not only has to make a complete sentence by improvising, but also must use the correct verb tense. The list provided contains both regular and irregular verbs, allowing for a wider evaluation of students' progress (assuming they have studied these verbs).

EVALUATION NOTES

One benefit of using this method for evaluation is that you can evaluate a pair of students while the others complete an in-class activity or homework. If necessary or more convenient, you can hold these assessments during a scheduled time after class.

The teacher should not appear to be intimidating during this exercise or evaluation, and you should remind students that the idea is for them to practice speaking in a real-life situation in an informal setting, with the goal of improving their language skills. I do not interrupt or stop the students to correct their mistakes; however, the teacher must be alert to make subtle suggestions only when necessary, if a student's meaning is unclear and the students are unable to continue, so that the conversation can proceed.

For example, if the question being asked is grammatically incorrect, the teacher must pay close attention. If a student receives a poorly worded question and gives an incorrect answer as a result of the question, that student should be given the opportunity to re-answer the question once it is corrected.

To simplify the evaluation process, I include preestablished elements of speech in an assessment chart so students know what I am looking for in their dialogues. In this case, teachers would look for correct and appropriate uses of superlative forms, with the option to look for other elements students have practiced (turn-taking, sentence-completion skills, pronunciation, etc.). If you use an assessment chart, let the students see it beforehand so they know how they will be evaluated.

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