

Using Question Grids to Scaffold, Monitor, and Evaluate Communicative Practice

by RUTH GOODE

Teaching large classes of students who aren't familiar with communicative activities can be challenging. One of the biggest challenges is to ensure that all students participate actively, especially if the teacher isn't able to pay close attention to them. I used to find that when I asked large classes of students to practice in pairs, they would often work together for only about two minutes and then stop.

There are many reasons why this happens, but the main reasons probably relate to different understandings of how languages are learned and, therefore, what kinds of things students believe they should do in a language class. More on this later.

One useful and simple strategy to help students stay on task for longer when doing communicative activities is to use a grid like the one in Figure 1. I used this grid with a beginning-level class to help students practice asking and answering questions using recently introduced vocabulary about family members.

In preparation, I did the following:

1. Review related vocabulary, grammar, and phrases—in this case, *What's your name?* and *How do you spell that?*
2. Clarify meaning, pronunciation, and written form of the new vocabulary or grammar (e.g., the names of family members and the question, *What's your _____'s name?*).
3. Demonstrate the activity with one student.
 - Distribute the photocopied grid or draw the grid on the board. If on the board, students should copy the grid into their notebook before the next step.
 - Ask a student (e.g., Maya) the first question (*What's your husband's name?*) and then show the class that you are writing her answer in the correct place on the grid.
 - Continue demonstrating with more questions. (With this vocabulary set, you might need to demonstrate that not all questions are necessary. For example, students need to choose whether to ask *What's your husband's name?* or *What's your wife's name?*—or perhaps neither of those questions is relevant.) You don't need to demonstrate asking all the

What's your _____'s name?			
	Name:	Name:	Name:
husband			
wife			
mother			
father			
sister			
brother			
son			
daughter			

Figure 1. Grid template for "What's your _____'s name?"

questions, but make sure students understand that they should ask each partner all the relevant questions.

- Demonstrate that Maya should now ask you the questions and write down your answers on her grid.
 - After both you and Maya have asked and answered questions, demonstrate finding a different partner and asking the questions again.
4. Ask students to begin the activity. It's nice if they can stand up and move around. Encourage students to continue until they have talked to at least two people.

5. Monitor closely, helping as appropriate. Some students may still be unsure about how to do the activity, some may need help with pronunciation or other issues, and some may need help finding another partner. If some students finish their exchanges with two students, ask them to find a third partner.

6. Ask students to stop the activity.

When students have finished, they will have a grid similar to the one in Figure 2, although not everyone will complete the grid. Faster students may talk to three people, while other students might still be talking to their first partner. Hopefully, though, all are actively engaged in practicing the target vocabulary and structure.

What's your _____'s name?			
	Name: David	Name: Lien	Name: Ai
husband	Feng	Zhang	
wife			Guang
mother	Chien	Baozhai	
father	Fen	Wang	
sister	Lien	Chen	Chunhua
brother	Hwang		Bingwen
son	Chang	Chao	
daughter	Ai		Fang

Figure 2. Filled-in grid for "What's your _____'s name?"

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Using grids in this way, students continue asking and answering the questions for much longer than in a traditional class and therefore get much more of the practice they need. There are a number of reasons why grids are effective:

- Grids give students a clear task and a clear stopping point. Students know they should continue asking questions until they have talked to three partners or most of the grid is complete.
- Grids give students support. All the new vocabulary and the target question are on the grid or board, and less-confident students can refer to these if necessary.
- Grids build confidence. I encourage students to look at the grid if they need help remembering the question(s), but when demonstrating the activity, I show them that they should always look up when speaking. By the time students have asked the questions a few times, they are likely to have memorized the new vocabulary and structures and will no longer need to refer to the grid to remind themselves of the new language.
- Grids allow the teacher to see who is doing the activity and who is not, to observe how well each student is progressing, and to offer appropriate support.
- Grids encourage an atmosphere of cooperation—and competition. Students enjoy competing to complete their grid.

As noted above, students who are not familiar with communicative classrooms may have different understandings of how languages are learned and therefore different beliefs about what kinds of things are effective language-learning activities.

Many traditional language classrooms are teacher-centered, and they focus primarily on written rather than spoken language and on accuracy rather than fluency. Students are often used to interacting in English only with the teacher and to receiving immediate accuracy-focused feedback from the teacher, rather than feedback or responses from a peer.

As a result, students may believe that the goal of speaking-practice activities is to produce error-free speech that imitates the teacher's model; that only the teacher's feedback is useful or important; and that if the teacher isn't listening, they should remain silent.

Students who are not familiar with communicative classrooms are therefore likely to be uncomfortable with pair-work activities and view them as a waste of time, because the teacher isn't listening and because they don't believe their fellow students are effective monitors of correctness. Using grids is a strategy to help students transition from student practices based on traditional understandings of language learning to student practices based on a communicative language-teaching approach.

Teachers can use grids at all levels and for almost every area of grammar or vocabulary. At the beginning level, I use grids to practice areas such as these:

- Jobs: *Are you a teacher/student/cook/garment worker/construction worker, etc.? And then, Is your husband/wife/daughter a teacher/student/cook, etc.?*
- Personal characteristics: *Is your brother/sister/son, etc., tall/short/young/old/married/single, etc.?*

Teachers can use grids at all levels and for almost every area of grammar or vocabulary.

- Times and daily routines: *What time do you get up/go to work/eat lunch/go home/eat dinner, etc.?* *your phone number? Have you been here before? What's your health insurance number?*
- Locations: *Where is the post office/bank/supermarket/hospital/school, etc.? It's next to ____/across from ____/on X Street, etc.* See the example grid in Figure 3.

I have also used grids to practice vocabulary such as the names of rooms (e.g., *Do you have a dining room?*), foods (*Do you like carrots?*), numbers (*What's your phone number?*), hobbies, colors, daily activities, clothes, household objects, school subjects, and many more. Grids are also useful for role-playing practical tasks that integrate a variety of vocabulary and grammar, such as the following:

At the beginning levels, it is useful to teach other phrases or expressions that students might need. For example, to help students ask and answer questions about family members' names, you might teach or review the following:

- Making a hotel reservation: *How many nights? What kind of room would you like? Would you like smoking or non-smoking? How would you like to pay?*
- Checking in at a hospital or doctor's office: *What's your name? What's your address? What's*

- Can you say that again, please?
- I don't have any brothers.
- How do you say ... ?

Because students use grids to record information about their partners, teachers can extend the practice by having students ask another partner questions about the students they have just interviewed. If they have just asked questions about family members' jobs (*What does your mother/father/brother/sister do?*), they could then ask questions such as, *What does David's father do?* Sometimes this involves a change in the form of the verb. For example, students might ask questions

Ask a student about his or her neighborhood.			
Where's the _____?		It's next to/across from/on	
	Name:	Name:	Name:
Post office			
Bank			
Supermarket			
Hospital			
School			
Gym			
Movie theater			
Library			

Figure 3. Grid template for describing locations: "Where's the _____?"

You can also use grids as the starting point for a writing activity.

about possessions (e.g., *Do you have a TV/car/computer?*). When they have finished asking three students these questions, they can interview each other about the people they have just talked to: *Does David have a TV/car/computer?* Or if they were asking questions about what people were doing at times in the past (e.g., *Where were you last night at 6:00?*), they could later ask, *Where was David at 6:00 p.m.?*

When students are comfortable using grids, you can give them a blank grid and ask them to write their own questions. You can approach this as a writing exercise with drafting and collaborative reviewing and editing. When the grids are complete, students can ask three or more students their questions, or they can ask one student their questions and then exchange grids so that they ask their next partner the new set of questions.

	When did you _____?	Where did you _____?	Who did you _____ with?	Why did you _____?
Have you ever worked in a store?				
Have you ever climbed a mountain?				
Have you ever ridden a horse?				
Have you ever eaten eel?				
Have you ever visited the capital city?				
Have you ever seen a play at the theater?				
Have you ever cooked Indian food?				

Figure 4. Grid template for practicing present-perfect and simple-past tenses

Ask your partner what he or she will be doing at these times in the future. e.g., What will you be doing in January next year? (Write your own questions in the last three rows.)			
	Name:	Name:	Name:
at 5:30 a.m.?			
tomorrow?			
on July 19th?			
after class?			

Figure 5. Grid template for “What will you be doing ... ?”

[Grids] promote communicative interaction and are especially useful for students who are new to communicative classrooms.

You can also use grids as the starting point for a writing activity. Suppose students have been asking questions about their homes, such as, *Do you have a kitchen/yard/garage?* and *Is it big/small?* With grids, they can interview another student and write a paragraph about his or her house: *Maria lives in a house on Laguna Street. It has two large bedrooms. Her house has a small yard.* And so on.

Another benefit is that grids can support students in practicing the new language outside the classroom. If students use a grid in class, you can assign them to ask three other people the same questions outside the classroom. Although this is easier in places where English is widely spoken, it is usually also possible in universities, in intensive English programs, or even online.

At advanced levels, grids help students practice a variety of vocabulary and grammar areas such as the grid in Figure 4, which focuses on questions in the present perfect and simple past. You can allow students to extend the conversation beyond the grammar or vocabulary area that you want them to practice. Here, students ask their partner one question and then four follow-up questions before changing partners.

One approach to making a grid to help students practice a particular grammar or vocabulary area is to think of a natural question using the target language. If you want students to practice the future progressive with *will* (e.g., *I'll be watching TV*), then a possible question is, *What will you be doing at X:XX p.m.?* With that in mind, you could create a grid like the one in Figure 5. Note that this particular grid includes room for these more-advanced learners to write their own questions.

There are so many ways to use this simple technique. Grids are effective in a variety of contexts, at a variety of levels, and, as the examples in this article show, with a variety of target language. They promote communicative interaction and are especially useful for students who are new to communicative classrooms. Enjoy!

Ruth Goode is a Regional English Language Officer currently based in Washington, D.C. She has been teaching since 1983 and training teachers since 1996. Her primary interests are in intercultural pragmatics, teacher change, and teacher training in low-resource environments.