

Promoting Solidarity in Short Interactions

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Level

The activities can be used at any level from elementary upward. The strategies themselves are straightforward. Difficulty level depends on the structures used in the conversations and the difficulty of the topic and lexical items. Therefore, teachers will need to adapt the examples to their own students and teaching contexts.

Time

10-15 minutes to set up the vocabulary search task in a previous lesson; 40-45 minutes for each activity.

Goal

To raise awareness of and give practice in using strategies of relexicalisation for descriptive accounts and for promoting solidarity in short interactions. A sub-goal is to provide students with interesting and natural vehicles for vocabulary development, recycling and revision.

Description of the Activities

I describe two activities to illustrate how rephrasing operates in different conversational contexts. The first context is a commonly used two-turn exchange where speakers who are sharing an experience comment upon it. The first speaker makes a comment that the second speaker builds upon by rephrasing it with an adjective or phrase that has the same positive or negative orientation, the same overall meaning but is different in degree of intensity. I will refer to the rephrasing process as relexicalisation. The effect of relexicalisation is collaborative and produces solidarity.

The second context in which a relexicalisation strategy can be used is in descriptive accounts, the focus of activity two. The speaker uses homonyms, near synonyms and antonyms to build up a descriptive picture and display personal attitudes towards the objects, people or events described. Listeners then contribute collaboratively to the development of the conversation by adding an evaluative comment in words which fall within the same lexical set and which may or may not be repetitions or qualified repetitions of words used by the main speaker.

Resources

Teacher prepares model conversations for the awareness raising activities. Board or OHP.

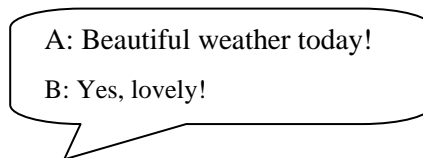
Optional – tape recorder with home produced recordings of the model conversations.

Teacher and learners prepare lexical sets.

Activity 1: Sharing an experience

This activity practices exchanging brief evaluative comments between friends or strangers who are sharing an experience using the strategy of relexicalisation. (Thanks to my colleague Simon Capper for his creative input to Activity I.) The prototypical exchange illustrated uses the topic of weather because it is so useful as a conversational opening gambit. The exchange here occurs between two people but three or more could be involved. This would make it more fun. When talking about the weather, typical comments employ a metaphorical usage, a word on a temperature scale, or a near synonym.

Example:



The model is

A: _____ weather today!
 adjective

B: Yes, _____
 adjective (near synonym)

The pedagogic pragmatic rule for the learners is that A chooses an adjective and B immediately responds with a different adjective or phrase but one with the same quality (positive or negative). Note the tendency for B to use a more intense response. Timing (rhythm) is important. B responds on the next ‘beat’. So B must be ready with a response.

Preparation

Teacher and students collect a lexical set of 4-5 words that have the same orientation (positive or negative) and same meaning but may be more or less specific or intense. Two examples are provided. In my idiolect (British English) *nice* is often a word A starts with, not one B responds with unless it is qualified – *really nice*. Notice also that *very* cannot be used with adjectives which already express a strong degree, so the modifier *really* + is provided. The + sign means it is placed in front of the adjective. If you want to use *pretty* +, you need to specify its collocations.

<u>Positive words</u>	beautiful, lovely, nice*, great, wonderful, glorious, superb, <i>really</i> +,
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<u>Negative words</u>	terrible, awful, horrible, miserable, rotten, foul, filthy, <i>really</i> +
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The third example is of words matched in pairs where A uses a basic rather neutral adjective and B uses a more specific and extreme adjective.

A	B
hot	boiling
hot	roasting
cold	freezing
chilly	freezing
cold	bitter
cold	chilly
cool	a bit chilly
cold	a bit nippy

Procedure

1. Introduce the activity and the topic and explain the aim. Ask students to bring 3 adjectives to the next class (see preparation). 15 minutes.
2. Next class. Collect all the adjectives and write them up on the board or OHT (if any are inappropriate explain why, but keep for another activity). Practice the pronunciation and stress of the words. Explain the modifiers.
3. Write up the model conversation on the board or OHT (such as the model exchange about weather above). Show the connection between the adjectives by, for instance, highlighting them with the same colour.
4. Explain the conversational strategy. Demonstrate the timing of the response. Play the tape if you have recorded the model conversation. In pairs ask the students to practice the exchange.
5. Rub out (erase) the adjectives and substitute blanks. Ask students to use the adjectives they have all collected in their own short exchanges. Stress the importance of the rhythm of the two turns. Students change partners, trying to speak with at least five different people.
6. Monitor practice. Stop the activity if there is a problem in common, demonstrate and then ask students to continue.
7. Finally, summarise the strategy and stress the main points. Students note down the example and the vocabulary items if they have not already done so.
8. Recycle this strategy with the different topics of your syllabus. It can act as a warmer, as a way of vocabulary building or as a vocabulary activation strategy for revision (or review).

Alternatives and Caveats

1. Topics can be virtually any situation where speakers make brief comments about something they are currently experiencing, thereby showing solidarity and shared values: weather, music, TV programmes, food. Be sure to use lexical items commonly used in your context in these situations. There is some overlap between situations but not a complete one.

Examples of opening lines include *Great party!*, *Good food!*, *Nice car!*, and *Interesting shirt!*

2. Use tag questions with falling intonation in first lines. The use of such tag questions in these situations is also a common collaborative strategy. Example: *A: Great party, isn't it?*
3. Extend the conversation into interactions with 3 or more speakers. This is more challenging because students need to know more words as the numbers of participants increase. However, one of the rules can be that speakers can reuse words if they qualify them. Example:
A: This is great music!
B: Fantastic!
C: Yeah, really great!
4. At advanced levels idioms can be introduced as near synonyms and antonyms.
5. If you have the resources, record the students' exchanges on video and allow time for playback and discussion (of rhythm, pronunciation and non-verbal aspects of the exchange).

Activity 2: Use of relexicalization in descriptions

Strategies: Students practise how to a) describe what their place (flat, apartment, room, or house) is like using a relexicalisation strategy b) listen to other people talking about their places and then make a comment to show friendship and support.

New words: searching for, using and practising synonyms and antonyms appropriate to the topic.

Topic: the example here is talking about people's homes.

Preparation - vocabulary search

Choose an appropriate topic to fit your syllabus. Help learners to brainstorm and use dictionaries or human resources to develop a short list of commonly used adjectives and phrases to make up the lexical set for the chosen topic. The number and type of the words and phrases will depend upon the level of the students, and will also vary with age, sex and occupation of the speakers.

The following is an example of a possible lexical set for describing people's homes:

<p><u>A room of one's own</u> big small large roomy spacious cosy comfortable a lot of not much not many very not very really not really quite</p>

Preparation- structure

Structures that you will have to introduce or will have to check that learners can handle, in the model example used here, are:

- a) *what's X like?*
- b) *It's + adjective* (check this is known)
- c) *it sounds + adjective; it feels + adjective*

d) use of modifiers – *really, quite, very*

Procedure

1. Introduce the activity and the topic and explain the aim. Ask students to bring 4-5 adjectives to the next class. 15 minutes. In my syllabus I incorporate this activity within the general topic of talking about places.
2. In the next class, in a box on the board/OHT write up the adjectives collected by students plus your own (to make sure you have the necessary modifiers and words for the awareness raising activity). Explain the role of the modifiers – *not, very, really, quite*
3. Raising awareness - model conversation

Student Task Read and listen to B telling A about his/her place. In the text underline the words which describe B's place. Use the same colour for words or phrases that mean almost the same thing. (The model is underlined here for illustration, but the conversations given to the students would not be.)

A: What's your new place like, B?

B: Well, It's not very big. It's quite small really, but it's cosy. It's got one room. I don't have a lot of furniture so it feels spacious and roomy.

A: It sounds comfortable

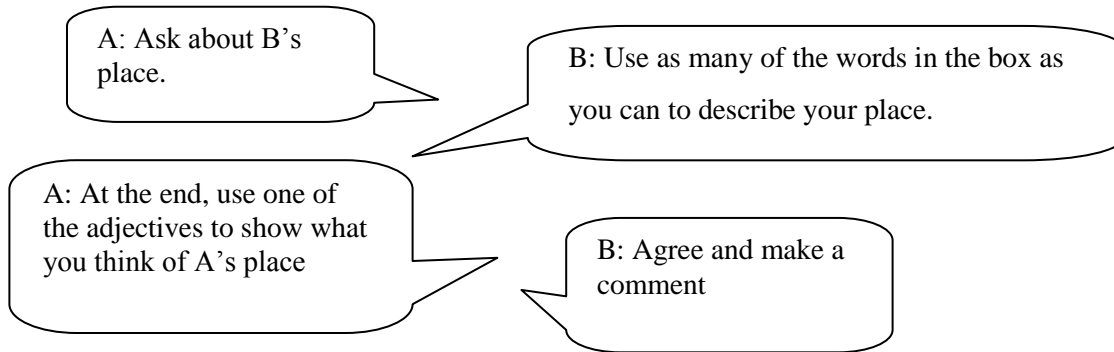
B: Yes it's very comfortable. I like it.

Give the students time to work together to see the emerging pattern. Use colours on the board/OHT to show the pattern. Check the concept is understood.

4. Speaking activity

In pairs talk about your room or home. Use the conversation we studied to help you. Change partners. Speak with at least five different people. Change roles. Here is an

outline of the conversation to guide you.



5. Follow-up. Briefly summarise the strategy again and stress the main points.

Alternatives and Caveats

1. Give bonus points for using especially interesting adjectives and phrases. This can be a lot of fun if students stretch their imaginations.
2. Use photos of rooms as visual stimuli. Ask the learners to imagine who lives in the room. Then ask them try to be that person and describe the room as their own. After changing roles they can show their pictures to each other and compare the photo with what they imagined the room to be like. Stimulating for more proficient students.
3. Ask students to say (or write about) whose place they liked best and why.
4. If you have the resources, record the students' exchanges on video and allow time for playback and discussion (of rhythm, pronunciation and non-verbal aspects of the exchange).

Rationale

The series from which these activities are drawn derives from work on spoken discourse analysis, in particular from the work of the British linguist Michael McCarthy and his work with the CANCODE British English corpus of spoken English. In *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics*, McCarthy (1998) illustrates the strategy of relexicalisation (reformulating the same idea using homonyms, near synonyms or

antonyms) and how this functions in collaborative discourse to produce solidarity and support and to move the conversation forward.

Often when students practise conversational exchanges they are asked to choose from a limited list of lexical alternatives. What an understanding of relexicalisation strategies teaches us is the need to encourage learners to say things in different ways using words that reflect their attitudes. In the awareness raising model example in Activity 2, for instance, a picture and an atmosphere starts to build up of where the main speaker lives. The near synonyms and antonyms show the speaker's attitudes towards the place and this seems intrinsically more interesting for communicative interaction than a bald physical description that appears divorced from the speaker's personal experience. The comment at the end by the second speaker is facilitated and motivated by the attitudinal content of the description. It becomes easier for listeners to comment supportively in response to the personal element. Structures like *it sounds* + and *it seems* + reflect this sharing of personal experience.

Reference

McCarthy, M. (1998). *Spoken Language and Applied Linguistics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.