

Exploiting material in the activity stage

Although activity types have already been touched upon at various points throughout the course, it may be worthwhile having another look at some of the different types that you may want to draw from when preparing materials for classroom use.

Pictures and picture stories

Communication can often be stimulated through the use of individual pictures or a series of pictures. As well as the use of pictures to set up scenes for the presentation stage of a lesson or for stimulating an initial discussion, many teachers find that pictures can also be used to encourage freer communication between students. Some examples might include spot-the-difference drawings where pairs of students are given pictures which differ in ten ways and are then asked to find these differences without looking at each others' picture. You can quite easily create your own collection of spot-the-difference activities by using paper whitener to erase some parts of a simple cartoon and then by adding features with a black pen. Once the two drawings have been photocopied it is impossible to see where the adjustments have been made.

A single photograph of a person, object or scene can often provide a jumping-off point for a discussion or the presentation stage of a lesson. If, for example, you would like to introduce the Present Simple to a class of elementary students, you could show them several pictures of a man, a woman and a couple of children and encourage the students to create their own ideas of what the family's daily routine is. While they are inventing the family's life, you could write up a selection of the best sentences on the board to use as examples later. In this way, the students are using their collective knowledge of the tense and lexis for families and routines – a very motivating introduction to a lesson. There is also the chance for a written activity towards the end of the lesson.

One way of reviewing a tense that the students have already been introduced to (e.g. the Present Continuous) is to hand out a drawing of a street scene in which there is a good deal of activity; the drawing might contain incidents such as a person carrying a pile of boxes across a busy road, a bank being robbed, a dog running across a road, some children playing in a fountain and so on. The students are then given a minute to study the picture carefully and to remember as much as they can. Afterwards they describe what they can remember, and disagreements can lead to interesting and useful language use. Finally, they could write down a short description of the scene.

Activities of this sort invariably encourage a good deal of interaction and beneficial language practice.

Another popular activity is the sequencing of a series of pictures to make up a story, often amusing or cautionary. However, in some cases, the suggestions in the teacher's book do not always fully exploit the material. Let us imagine that in one textbook you find a series of 10 pictures showing someone cleaning their car. The pictures show the car in various stages of cleanliness and the owner working around it and inside it, and polishing it. In one picture, the owner stands and looks at the car with pride. One picture also shows a branch from a tree lying on top of the very clean, but now dented car, and the owner looking dismayed. The activity related to these pictures involves the students linking half-sentences to make a continuous piece of text. You feel that there are more interesting ways to use this material and so you decide to prepare your own stages for using this material. Here are the stages that you might decide to follow:

- Sit the class (10 students) in a circle. Give each of them one picture in random order. Tell them not to look at each other's picture.
- Ask each student to study their picture and be prepared to describe it. They may need help with some unknown vocabulary or ways of expression.
- Each student describes their own picture.
- Ask the students to try to work out the order of the pictures without looking at each other's picture. Students try to work out the order by asking others questions and by describing their own picture when necessary.
- When they think they have the right order, ask the students to write a brief description of their picture.
- Ask them to place their pictures in the correct order on the floor so everyone can see them, but without speaking.
- Ask them to read out their descriptions. Do any changes need to be made to the order or the descriptions?
- Ask the students to write out the whole story.