

Secrets and lies

Jason Anderson shows that lying is a very important social and communicative skill which our students will (within reason) get a lot of fun and practice out of.

Try a little experiment – have a look at your most recent text messages. How far back do you have to go to find a lie? Perhaps not a complete lie, but an exaggeration, an excuse or an embellishment of the truth. Now look at your Facebook posts or your LinkedIn profile, and, if you're single, your online dating profile. Hopefully I've convinced you that lying is not just a useful skill, it's a social necessity. In our first language, we practise it all the time, speaking or writing, without even thinking about it.

Lying is also a cultural universal. Common to all peoples, it plays a range of roles, from malicious deception, through bargaining and rhetoric to diplomacy, flattery and 'white lies'. These all find their way into our language classrooms in varied forms, either through the artifice of role play and drama (see Gabrielli's recent article, *MET* 24.2, 2015) or the negotiation of relationships that takes place between learners. Lying is as much a part of the communicative language classroom as it is of the world outside. But what makes lying particularly valuable to us as teachers is the opportunities it can provide for spontaneous, creative and varied language use. The dilemma is – how exactly can we do it so as not to destroy relationships or trust between learners or between learner and teacher? The answer, I believe, is through play.

Lying games have been around for decades in the ELT classroom. After suggesting improvements to two classic lying games and then describing two of my own ideas, I will explore the potential benefits of getting learners to deceive each other in the classroom.

Two old classics

'Two truths and a lie' is perhaps the most commonly used lying game. It can be used to practise almost any area of language and is usually played in pairs or small groups. Learners write three sentences about themselves, usually including the grammar or lexis you want to practise (eg. past simple tense). Two of these sentences are true and one is a lie. They then take turns to show their sentences to their partner, who interrogates them about each one to work out which is the lie. It usually goes well, although sometimes the lies can be easy to guess, making the interrogation phase rather short. If you want to increase the spoken communication, provide each learner with a card before the game on which a number from 0–3 is written. They keep this number secret. It indicates how many of their three sentences must be lies. Their partner then has a greater challenge because they don't know how many sentences are true, which inevitably leads to more speaking practice.

'Alibi' is a well-known game in which two learners get together to concoct an alibi for a day or evening when an imaginary crime was committed. They are interviewed separately by the rest of the class, who try to find differences in their stories to prove that they are lying. It's a great way to practise past tenses (especially past continuous). However, it can be difficult to get right in class. For example, we need to consider what everyone else does when the two learners are devising their alibi, and we may not be able to abandon one learner in the corridor during the interviews. If you face these problems, here are two useful ideas:

- Organise pairs in the preceding lesson and tell them to prepare shared alibis for homework. If they can meet up after class, Skype each other or use messaging apps, this can make a fun, motivating, communicative homework activity that will also save you time in class for the interviews.
- In class, divide the learners into two, four or six groups, with each group interviewing the pairs in another group simultaneously. This way, everyone is involved, no-one is waiting outside, and the groups are smaller, making it work much better in large classes.

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Two new ideas

'Coin of truth' is a pairwork game that can liven up any set of discussion questions from your coursebook as long as the answers require

personalisation (eg. personal information, opinions, etc.). It requires only one extra resource per pair – a coin. Learners take turns to answer the questions, but before answering, they flip the coin secretly. If it's heads, they tell the truth, and if it's tails, they lie. Their partner can then ask several follow-up questions before guessing whether they were telling the truth or lying. Flipping the coin makes the lying more spontaneous and skilful – it goes down especially well with teenage learners who always seem to be very good at it!



'Secret sentences' is a deception game of a different kind. It can be played during any groupwork discussion activity, especially ones that involve giving opinions or debating. Before the lesson, create a number of unusual, but plausible sentences that are likely to liven up such a discussion (see Table 1 for an example set appropriate for B1/B2 level learners). Copy and cut up a set for each group. Before the discussion, each learner takes one or two secret sentences. They have to integrate these sentences into the conversation without their classmates noticing. If anyone suspects someone has just used a secret sentence, they should say 'Secret sentence'. They score a point if they're right and lose one if not. At the end of the discussion, any learner who has used their sentence without being noticed scores three points.

Table 1: Cards for 'Secret sentences'

| | | |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|
| 'Do you really think that?' | 'I never thought of it like that.' | 'I'm sorry, but that's total rubbish.' |
| 'That's the most interesting thing you've said today!' | 'That's what I was going to say!' | 'Go on – it's very interesting.' |
| 'Does anyone agree with him/her?' | 'I can't believe you're saying that.' | 'But I don't think that's true today.' |

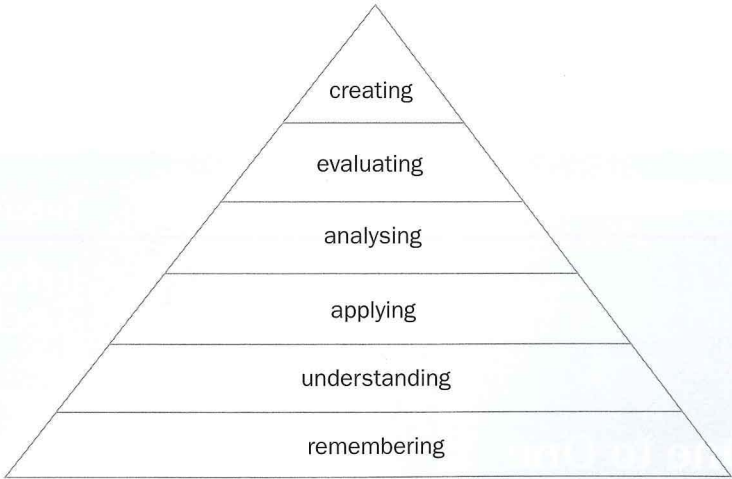


Figure 1: The cognitive domain from the revised Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives (adapted from Anderson et al, 2001)

Why lie?

The most obvious and powerful reason for getting learners to lie in the classroom is because it's fun. And as we all know, any activity that is intrinsically motivating is likely to lead to more language use, more interest in English lessons, and more learning as a result. But there are other reasons that are equally convincing.

Lying involves *creating*. Trying to guess whether someone else is lying involves *evaluating*. These two cognitive skills sit at the top of the cognitive domain of Bloom's taxonomy (Anderson et al, 2001; see Figure 1). By encouraging learners to invent lies, deceive

their classmates or smuggle secret sentences into a conversation, we are providing opportunities for them to develop these cognitive skills, leading to a number of knock-on advantages as learners become simultaneously more creative and more critical.

Closely linked to creativity, lying involves developing learners'

imagination, something that Guy Cook believes may be at the root of all language use:

'It might be that, both ontogenetically and phylogenetically, the first function of language is the creation of imaginative worlds: whether lies, games, fictions or fantasies.'
(Cook, 2000: 47)

As such, lying and deception activities are likely to develop other aspects of learners' imagination, which is useful when we ask them to come up with example sentences, create fictional stories, produce imaginary reports or hypothesise complex conditional situations. These are all common, but often challenging, activities in the language classroom, especially for teenage learners.

A third, less obvious advantage of lying activities is that they provide opportunities for us to focus on the *interactional* function of language. Brown and Yule (1983) distinguish the transactional function of language (conveying propositional content) from the interactional function (expressing social relations or personal attitudes). Language use in the classroom tends to prioritise transactional use to the detriment of interactional use. However, in order to lie successfully, we need to attend to *what* we say and *how* we say it. Consider the following common 'white lies', all of which are told with the main aim of maintaining social relationships:

'It looks really nice on you.'
'You haven't changed a bit!'
'I can't, I'm afraid. I'm busy that evening.'

'Sorry – I just got your message ...'
'It's just what I wanted!'

For us to pull these off successfully, we have to be surprisingly good actors. We need to focus on body language and facial expression (ie. paralanguage) as well as intonation, all acting in harmony. Try getting your learners to improvise mini role plays based on these white lies, and then to perform them for the whole class. You will soon notice which ones already have these skills, and which will benefit from more practice!

What about with younger learners?

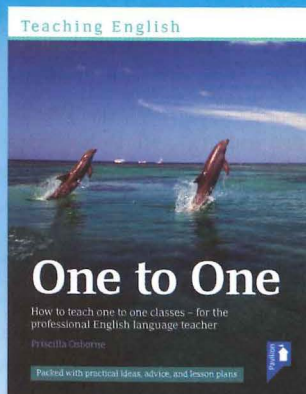
While lying games and activities are great fun for adult and older teenage learners, they may not be appropriate for younger learners. If you're thinking of doing them with learners under fifteen, begin by sensitising them to the moral issues around lying, and delineate clearly the boundaries of the game and the rest of the lesson. With this caution in mind, I have found that learners from ages twelve to seventy all enjoy and benefit from the universal art of lying, and the games that promote it in the language classroom.

References

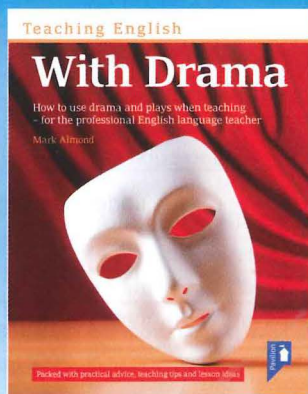
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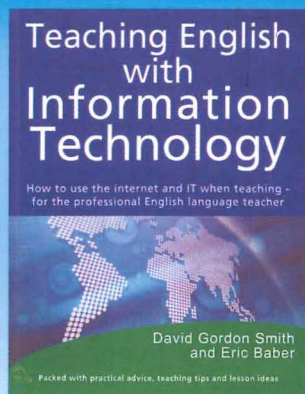
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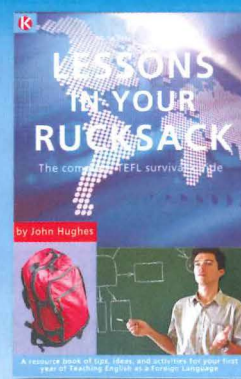
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£14.95



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