Deconstructing jigsaw activities

Jason Anderson analyses the key factors involved in designing this type of task.

Jigsaw reading activities have been a mainstay of communicative language teaching (CLT) for over three decades. Most of us are familiar with 'case-comparison jigsaws', in which different students read about different examples (cases) of the same phenomenon (e.g. restaurants) and then share the content with each other. However, many other types of jigsaw are also possible, such as grammar jigsaws, research jigsaws and story jigsaws. This article provides a number of ideas for different types of jigsaw, and also presents an original taxonomy of jigsaw activities for English language teachers.

Origins

Jigsaw activities did not originate in communicative language teaching. They trace their origins back further to one of the innovators of the cooperative learning movement, an American psychologist called Elliot Aronson (e.g. Aronson *et al*, 1978). He developed the idea for 'The Jigsaw Classroom' in 1971 as a potential way to improve cooperation between learners from different ethnic backgrounds in the newly desegregated schools of Austin, Texas, in the USA. Like other cooperative learning innovators, such as Robert Slavin or Spencer Kagan, Aronson noticed that getting learners to work together to achieve a shared outcome cultivated both *positive interdependence* and *individual accountability*, two key principles of cooperative learning (Anderson, 2019). Jigsaws are the perfect way to do this – by giving different learners different texts and a shared goal that requires information from all the texts, they encourage teamwork and shared responsibility.

Defining 'jigsaw'

A jigsaw is a cooperative information-gap activity with two stages. The *input stage* involves input of information (usually a text), with different learners accessing different information to create the information gap. The *communication stage* follows this and involves communication of that input to others in pair or group interaction.

In cooperative learning, learners are often put into so-called 'expert groups' for the input stage, typically same-ability groups so that the learners most proficient in English get the most challenging text, and those whose English is less proficient get an easier

text. After this, they return to their 'home groups' for the communication stage, when they share what they learned in the input stage (see, for example, Kagan & Kagan, 2009). The most common type of jigsaw is a reading jigsaw, and usually involves pairwork or groupwork. Each member of the group gets a different text to read, after which they communicate what they have read to each other, perhaps to answer comprehension questions, to complete a shared task or to synthesise their findings.

Different types of jigsaw

By varying factors such as the source, the medium or the type of text during the input stage, or by varying the goal

Table 1: A taxonomy of jigsaw activities

Input stage

Text source
- teacher selected (e.g. coursebook jigsaw)
- learner selected (e.g. bring-a-story jigsaw)
- learner researched (e.g. internet jigsaw)

Text type
- non-pedagogic – not designed for learners (e.g. from news website)
- pedagogic – designed for learners (e.g. from coursebook)
- metalinguistic (e.g. rules about related areas of grammar, or guidelines on writing a CV)

Text medium
- written (e.g. reading jigsaw)
- aural (e.g. listening jigsaw)
- video (e.g. YouTube jigsaw)

Text difference
- case comparison jigsaw, involving multiple texts covering different examples within the same category (e.g. three different jobs or four different cities)
- same text with internal differences (e.g. spot-the-difference texts)
- fragmented text (e.g. story jigsaw)
- same genre (e.g. informal emails)

Time gap between stages

- none (as in a typical reading jigsaw)
- stage 1 completed before class (e.g. flipped jigsaw)
- stages 1 and 2 completed in different lessons (e.g. recall jigsaw)

Communication stage

Group size
- pairs (2-text jigsaw)
- groups (3–4-text jigsaw)
- whole class (whole class jigsaw)

Interaction dynamic
- seated together in pairs or groups
- mingle (e.g. whole class jigsaw)
- computer-mediated (e.g. Skype jigsaw)

Communication type
- retell (e.g. retelling stories, limericks or jokes for pleasure)
- structured (e.g. to answer comprehension questions)
- synthesis (e.g. to order text fragments; to understand a phenomenon)
- task (e.g. to solve a problem; to come to a consensus opinion)
- pedagogic activity (e.g. to improve a CV; to complete a gap-fill activity)
- preparation (e.g. to prepare for a presentation; to prepare for a test)

and interaction pattern during the communication stage, we can create a wide variety of jigsaw activities to engage learners. Here are some simple variations on the classic reading jigsaw. All require just a little preparation to create your own jigsaw activities from scratch.

1. **Story jigsaw:** Before class, choose an interesting story and divide it into two or three sections (depending on whether you want learners to work in pairs or groups). Each group member then gets a different section of the story to read in the input stage. During the communication stage, the learners retell their sections of the story and decide what order they go in in the original story.

2. **Grammar jigsaw:** Give each learner a short text about a different aspect of related grammar during the input stage (e.g. give Student A the rules for forming and using comparative adjectives and Student B the rules for using and forming superlative adjectives). The learners then use this information during the communication stage. This could be simply a task in which they work together to complete a gap-fill activity using the grammar they've just read about (e.g. 'complete the sentences with the comparative or the superlative form of the adjective'), or a writing task comparing two or three famous cities. Create a rule that they are not allowed to show their grammar text to each other, so they must explain what they've learned to each other as they do the activity.

3. **Research jigsaw:** Put learners into pairs and give them access to the internet. Direct each pair to a different website that they must use to research a related theme during the input stage (e.g. things to do in London). Then put two or three pairs together for the communication stage to synthesise this information (e.g. tell them that they must agree on what they will do on an imaginary weekend trip to London). See my earlier article on 'Internet jigsaws' in *MET* 25 (2).

4. **Flipped jigsaw:** If your lessons are short, you could give the learners the input text to read for homework. Next lesson, as soon as they come to class, they can begin the communication stage. This can even be combined with a research jigsaw, by giving different learners in a group different websites to visit (rather than texts to read), making it a 'Flipped research jigsaw'!

5. **Spot-the-difference jigsaw:** Take one text (e.g. a short news story), retype it and then change the facts to create two or three slightly different versions. During the input stage, learners read and remember their version of the story. Then during the communication stage, they ask and answer questions to 'spot' the factual differences between the versions.

A taxonomy of jigsaw activities

The variations don't stop there. Table 1 identifies key factors that you can change to vary the jigsaw type. You can see how the examples provided above fit into the taxonomy.

Finding texts for jigsaws

Many coursebooks today include jigsaw texts, complete with tasks and questions to use, and these can be adapted, if necessary, by making changes to the variables above. However, if your coursebook doesn't have any or many jigsaws, it is often possible to adapt the texts it includes for jigsaws. For example, if you've got a rather long text, consider separating it into three sections. Put students into groups of three, give each one a section of the text and tell them not to show it to each other. Now write six comprehension questions in random order on the board (two from each section) and get groups to work together to answer them (without looking at each other's texts). The internet is also a rich source for texts. If you want case studies of people with different jobs, try searching for 'a day in the life', or if you want texts using future tenses,

try searching 'cities of the future'. You should get a number of texts in each case. Choose the most suitable one and adapt the others so that they have a similar structure and length.

Synthesis questions

While comprehension questions are useful, synthesis questions are often faster to create and require learners to compare and evaluate the texts at a deeper level. So if, for example, your texts are about different jobs, get students to try to agree on who has the most challenging, interesting or boring job and why. If they're about cities of the future, get them to try to agree on which of the cities would promote a more harmonious society, and why. It may take a little time to develop such materials, but once you have, you can use them again and again with different classes.

The possibilities with jigsaws are many. By providing the raw materials of language learning (comprehensible input) and opportunities to use these materials (communication), they are – *arguably* – the ultimate communicative teaching activity.

References

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