

Using activities effectively



Jason Anderson looks at the role of the activity in learner-centred education.

One of the most basic ideas underpinning learner-centred, constructivist approaches to education is the concept of the activity. Without it, there are no opportunities for learners to work independently of the teacher's whole-class control: lessons involve only lecturing, teacher-led questioning or student presentations, losing the opportunity for the learners to work either individually or collaboratively at their own pace. Thus, some of the most fundamental approaches to either language teaching (eg task-based learning, CLIL) or mainstream teaching (eg project-based learning and cooperative learning) are only made possible by the teacher's ability to select, instruct, manage and conclude activities appropriately.

This article will look at two important aspects of activities which affect their success in the classroom. It may be useful for teachers at the start of their career (pre-service or novice), or for

experienced teachers who are having difficulty using activities or simply want to check and consolidate their understanding of them. It also offers two diagrams and access to one further free resource that may be useful on teacher education programmes.

Defining 'activity'

On a daily basis, many of us, including me, use terms such as 'activity' and 'task' interchangeably. However, writers in different fields of education often make distinctions between these terms. Writers on language teaching methodology, particularly those that promote task-based language teaching (TBLT), such as David Nunan, often use the term 'task' for occasions when the learners are using language primarily to express or understand meaning, and 'activity' for occasions when they are expected to practise a more specific range of language (eg an activity to practise the simple past tense). Robin Alexander, in his influential book

Culture and Pedagogy, makes a very different distinction between ‘task’ and ‘activity’, seeing ‘task’ as a description of the conceptual purpose or aim for which an ‘activity’ is used: ‘*The learning task is its conceptual component; the learning activity is the task’s practical counterpart, or the means through which the teacher intends the child to make the required conceptual advance from what was learned previously to what must be learned now.*’

Within the approach known as activity-based learning, the term ‘activity’ is often left undefined (ironically), and used interchangeably with ‘task’ to refer to pretty much any classroom practice where the students are ‘involved’: According to Marilyn Suydam and Jon Higgins, for example, during activities, the students may be ‘*involved with such things as worksheets or workbooks, programmed instruction booklets, teaching machines or computer terminals, audiovisual materials or calculators.*’

In this article, because I am focusing on the activity as a tool for constructivist learning, I will use the term ‘activity’ to refer to any occasion when the learners are provided with an opportunity to work independently of the teacher’s direct control, whether this be individual work involving an exercise (on paper or computer), a reading or listening task, or collaborative work in pairs or groups, irrespective of the focus. In this sense, activities can range from very brief ‘think–pair–share’ opportunities during a presentation to longer communication ‘tasks’ in TBLT, and even to multi-lesson projects in project-based learning (eg to create a poster, write a story or investigate a specific phenomenon). In this sense, the *opposite* of an activity is whole-class teaching, when the teacher expects all the learners to be listening to, interacting with and responding appropriately to her or him. Research evidence is generally conclusive that both whole-class teaching and activities are essential elements of effective pedagogy (see, for example, John Hattie’s book *Visible Learning*), yet while whole-class teaching is familiar to pretty much all of us from our own school education, the use of activities in the classroom is by no means universal around the world, and while learner-centred/constructivist approaches are *promoted* in almost all educational contexts worldwide, surprisingly little guidance and support is provided for teachers during pre-service teacher education in how to select and conduct activities effectively.

Activities in lesson and curricular frameworks

Activities can be found in pretty much all contemporary frameworks for structuring lessons. The well-known Presentation–Practice–Production (PPP) model includes two clear opportunities for



activities: controlled ones during the Practice stage and freer activities during the Production stage. Within different models for TBLT, obviously the task itself is an activity stage, but there may also be other activities in the lesson, such as a pre-task listening activity, or a presentation stage, which itself is also an activity; Jane Willis’s framework for task-based language teaching allows for all of these. An alternative model, promoted in mainstream education, is Geoff Petty’s Present–Apply–Review (PAR) model, within which the Apply stage usually involves an extended learner-centred activity, although brief activities are also possible in other stages.

For both novice and experienced teachers who are not used to using activities in the classroom, let’s look at two aspects of activities which are key to their success:

- **Activity planning:** selecting activities, planning to use them in class, using them and learning from their use.
- **The ‘activity cycle’:** setting up activities, monitoring activities and conducting feedback on activities during the lesson.

1 Activity planning

Very often, the *selection* of activities is decided upon by somebody other than the teacher. For example, if you work predominantly with a coursebook as your ‘curriculum’, the coursebook itself usually provides activities, along with other elements, such as texts and language analysis sections. Alternatively, you

may work in a department which has developed its own modules of learning that select and sequence the activities for you. While such pre-prepared materials may work well in some classes, there is no guarantee that the specific activity choice or ordering of activities is appropriate for *your* learners. A text may be too difficult, a task may fail to get the learners using language as intended, or an exercise may only be suitable for *some* of your learners, and you may need alternatives that you can tailor to different abilities.

Thus, there are several key skills that teachers need to learn with regard to activity planning: the ability to evaluate,

and sometimes reject, individual activities (*What is its aim? Is it appropriate and useful for my learners? Will the activity, as designed, achieve the intended aims?*); the ability to sequence a set of activities for a lesson or unit (*Should I do the vocabulary building before or after the task? Do the learners need the revision activity provided?*); and the ability to adapt and even replace activities with alternatives (*How can I make it work more effectively? What alternative activities could achieve the same aim?*). These three skills are often drawn upon simultaneously when we plan. There is also a fourth, retrospective

skill related to activity planning, one that – importantly – cannot be done for us by anyone else: looking back on specific activities in the lesson to assess formatively how they went and what learning happened, in order to plan future activities. Figure 1 shows one way of representing the complex relationship between these skills.

Many teachers learn these skills with experience, but newly-qualified teachers, particularly those working in contexts where the materials they are expected to use don't really match the needs of their learners, will need to learn them through practice, and can benefit from planning and assessing activities with 'buddies', mentors or even in larger groups.

2 The activity cycle

Perhaps the most challenging aspect of activity use to master, at least for novice teachers, is how to *carry out* activities in class. Experienced teachers can make this seem effortless, but there are, in fact, three key stages that are normally conducted in sequence, constituting an 'activity cycle'. Figure 2 shows these stages.

The first of these three stages involves preparation, particularly the instructions that we provide. Getting this right is important, as it ensures that, once the activity starts, all the students are doing it correctly and are on track to achieve the activity objective. If you get it wrong, you may spend valuable time re-explaining the activity to different groups, which is particularly time-consuming in large classes. The suggestions provided in the Preparation box in Figure 2 are often best done in the order provided.

The second stage (Activity) focuses on what the teacher might do while the learners are (hopefully) engaged with the activity. These do not need to be done in any particular order, although the first recommendation ('Check the students are doing the activity correctly') is a good idea at the start, and the final one is only required at the end of an individual activity (eg a reading or listening task). Of the others, perhaps the most important is providing support to individuals or groups that need it. This is a valuable opportunity to offer 'tuition', especially to weaker learners. Keeping your voice quiet to

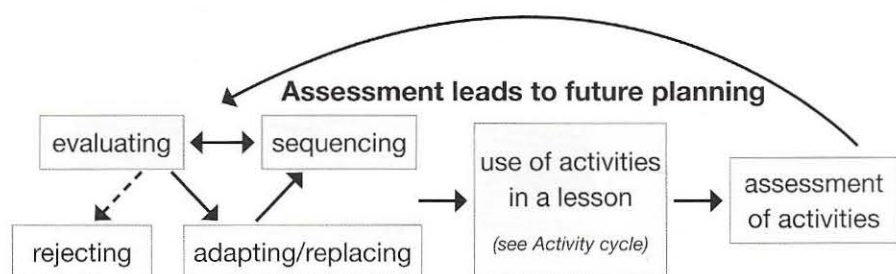


Figure 1 Activity planning

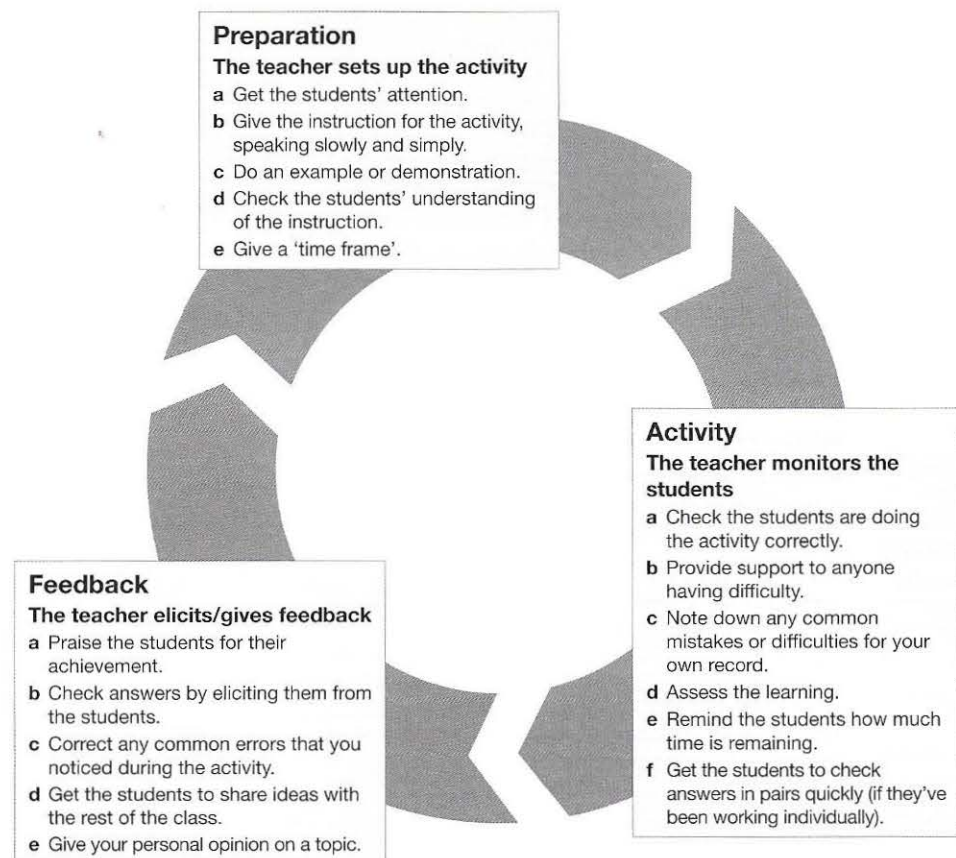


Figure 2. The activity cycle

ensure that the tuition is confidential, offering praise before criticism, and listening to learners as they explain their thinking behind an answer are key skills you can practise if you are new to monitoring in this way. At this point, you may also be asked questions by individual students; these are often requests for personal help, and can also lead to useful tuition. Points c) and d) relate to formative assessment, and can help you to make the subsequent feedback stage more valuable.

Exactly what happens in the third stage (Feedback) will depend on what the activity involved, although this can always start with praise – for example, if the learners succeeded in doing the activity using mainly English, or if they worked well in groups:

- If it was a 'closed' activity, with correct and incorrect answers (eg a gap-fill activity, or a reading comprehension task), it is useful to elicit the answers from the learners, and important to either confirm these or correct any misunderstandings; the latter should be done tactfully, but clearly. It is also useful to check why a specific answer is correct, particularly if many learners had difficulty with the item – this can also be elicited from the learners.
- If the activity was a more 'open' activity, with answers that may depend on opinion or evaluation, feedback should be responsive to this. For example, if you gave the learners a task to decide what is the best solution to a problem, or to create something, feedback becomes an opportunity for them to share their ideas or work with the rest of the class. This may involve brief performances in front of the class, presentations, or a mingle stage where the learners share their findings one-on-one with each other.

Be aware that presentations or performances can get repetitive, so it's often a good idea to limit these to avoid the learners becoming disengaged. If the activity involved opinions, this stage can involve a level of 'class debate', where different group representatives can be encouraged to agree and disagree with each other, and the learners may also be interested in *your* opinion, which also provides an opportunity to provide 'exposure' to a familiar voice engaging with the activity topic, and helps to develop the learners' listening skills.

During the feedback stage, a focus on correction is also useful, although it shouldn't be the sole focus – everything else above is also important. At this point, avoid singling out individual learners or unique errors, particularly during presentations or performances. The negative impact of doing this on a learner's self-esteem can be considerable. Instead, focus on providing correction of common errors, ones that

you heard more than once while the learners were doing the activity. These are likely to be the most developmentally appropriate errors to focus on for the group as a whole. If you can also provide a little *ad hoc* clarification of the error (explaining why it's incorrect or unnatural), this can be particularly useful.



Hopefully, this brief discussion of two important aspects of activities has been useful. Even if you knew all of this already, diagrams, such as those provided here, can help to bring the different elements together and provide names for skills and schemata that hitherto remained undescribed.

Finally, if you are a teacher educator, and you would like to use the activity cycle either in a pre-service programme (to train novice teachers) or in an INSET workshop (for CPD), you can find a free version of the cycle that you can cut up to create cards on my website (www.jasonanderson.org.uk/resources.htm – search for 'activity cycle'). Teachers can work in groups to decide which part of the activity cycle a strategy belongs in, and try to order the strategies provided. Either way, do let me know if you find it useful, or if you have other thoughts or ideas on activities and how you use them in your teaching. ■

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