PRODDING SHY STUDENTS INTO ACTIVE PARTICIPATION THROUGH GOSSIPING

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Abstract

This article explores one possible way of exploiting one of our human weaknesses – a tendency to gossip – for language practice. It attempts to show how a number of interpersonal exchanges can be made by making use of our feelings for the people around us. The activity presented in this article, therefore, stresses the humanistic aspect of learning, and is intended to provide the learners with opportunities to talk and to listen with a communicative purpose in mind, thereby helping them to improve their fluency in English.

The most distinctive trait that sets men apart from other animals as social animals is the ability to talk. But people talk only when there is something to talk about. Talking about the weather, prices of

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commodities, health, appointments, travel and entertainment are just a few of the various topics that people often address in their daily conversation. Harmer. J (1997: P 46-47) generalizes about the nature of communication thus: Speakers say things because they want something to happen as a result of what they say. They may want to charm their listeners; they may want to give some information or express pleasure. They may decide to be rude or to flatter, to agree or complain. In each of these cases they are interested in achieving a communicative purpose. In general – he continues to say about the listeners – people listen to language because they want to find out what the speaker is going to say - in other words what ideas they are conveying, and what effect they wish the communication to have. Oral fluency classes may benefit more if the activities used in the classroom reflect these basic characteristics necessary for effective communication. The tasks of the present-day language teachers, therefore, have become all the more challenging, as improving the students' capacities to use the language meaningfully largely depends on their ingenuity and hard work.

Gossiping as a universal language function

The topic "Prodding Shy Students into Active Participation through Gossiping" was born of my desire to give extended oral practice to students who remain rather inhibited in spite of having a working knowledge of grammar. In other words, this is an attempt to encourage less fluent students to talk with inspiration. The idea, in fact, had stemmed from Chafe's notion of three types of involvement in conversation (1985:116): self-involvement of the speaker, interpersonal involvement between speaker and hearer, and involvement of the speaker with what is being talked about. Gossip, one of the commonest types of discourse that people of all times have engaged in, is very much characterized by the interactive nature of interaction. Moreover, gossipers tend to adopt the strategy of negatively evaluating non-present third parties, and the familiarity of their strategies makes the discourse and its meaning seem coherent, and allows for the elaboration of meaning through the play of familiar patterns (Tannen D.1996, P13). In Gregory Bateson's words (1972), it sends a metamessage of rapport between the communicators, who thereby experience that they share communicative conventions and inhabit the same world of discourse. Few people can avoid gossiping in today's world, where competition abounds in every sphere. The only difference will be the amount of gossip they engage in, depending on what type of people they are. Gossiping can therefore rightly be claimed as a universal language function.

Whom or what to be gossiped about?

It could be embarrassing for the students if they were asked to gossip face to face about someone whom they all personally know. In some cases, they might even have to exchange angry words if the person chosen for gossiping has relatives or friends in the gossiping group. On the other hand, choosing some imaginary person may not help produce inspired gossip, as meaning and mental images come only when connection is made with the learners' own world of experience (Lindstromberg 1990: xi). Yet we are not devoid of raw materials. Newspaper, television, and radio can provide us with news of the meanest persons on earth. Depending on the students' tastes, the person chosen for the gossiping – the raw material in our situation - can be a sportsman, a politician, a leader of a country, a criminal, a businessman or even people blacklisted by history. If the learners are mature and understanding, the person to be gossiped about may even be chosen from another group in the classroom. One alternative, which will not only save a lot of class time but also help the inhibited students to break the ice, is the one in which the teacher gives each member of the group two or three different pieces of written information about the person to be gossiped about – someone whom everybody in the groups knows to a certain extent. The main purpose of this whole activity is only to help the learners to talk with meaning – to talk in a context. It is an example of how a number of interpersonal exchanges can be made by making use of our feelings for the people around us. It is hoped that they will expand once they get motivated. The gossipers may add as much gossip as they can imagine, so long as they are using English.

Who gossiped how?

The students I did this activity with are upper intermediate level students studying at Assumption University, Thailand. Many of the learners are shy types, though fairly well-grounded in grammar. Their ages range between 18 to 22. In order that all the participants might have sufficient opportunity to express themselves, I prolonged the activity by leading the students through three stages. The person chosen to be gossiped about for that very first time was myself – their teacher- though the facts given to them for gossiping were meant only for fun. For the sake of effectiveness, each gossip group did not exceed three members – an appropriate size for gossiping. Groups were formed on the basis of intimacy among members for the first round of gossiping, so as to produce the most-inspired gossip. It was hoped that students, in the process of gossiping using the given information, would get motivated and start using a variety of tenses, positive and negative statements, questions, and the like whenever the occasion arose. For example, one might start with the

gossip, " San (my name) is very short, but he loves tall women. Don't you think he is foolish?" Another might reply, " But the funny thing is that he has never been in love. No woman loves him."

Real classroom experience

This is how I conducted this activity with my students. First, I briefly explained to the class the nature of the activity and got the participants to sit in groups of three. Eight groups emerged out of the 24 students. When all the group members were comfortably seated in their respective groups, a small piece of paper containing three different gossip items was distributed to each group member.

Here are some examples of the gossip items that I used in the activity:
/ never keeps promises/ / never good to friends/ / too fond of beautiful girls/ / always forgets to return borrowed money / / interested in sleeping and eating only/ / stays aloof/ / stingy/ / never neat and tidy/ /very lazy/ / knows little, but very boastful/ / looks down on people who cannot speak English / / has a marked accent/ / not helpful/ / no sense of duty/ / assumes no responsibility for his family/ / never admits his faults/ / envies people around him/ / very greedy and selfish/ / likes flattery/ / does not believe in any religion/ /

teacher in name only, doesn't know how to teach / / very short, but loves tall women / / very ugly, no woman loves him/ / likes gambling/ / drinks like a fish/ / always late for appointments/ / fawns on the rich and the powerful/ / has no sympathy for the poor and uneducated/ / always pessimistic / / socks always smelly/ and so on.

The first phase of the activity took nearly ten minutes. Some students chuckled, while others grinned as they gradually got absorbed in the activity. But one noticeable thing – a very unnatural phenomenon in our situation – was that nobody remained passive. They listened and talked by turns, each curious to know what his/her peers had to say about their teacher, and eager to tell them about the information s/he had. My duty, as a teacher, was going round the class to check if communication was really taking place, and to give assistance to the students should they need it.

The second phase was carried out in a similar fashion. When everyone in each group had finished gossiping to their heart's content, new groups of three were formed randomly and each group was asked to gossip again using all the information they had gained in the previous round, thus creating as vivid an image of the gossiped-about person as possible. To make the language sound more natural, the gossipers in this phase of activity were not allowed to look at the written

information at all. They were made to speak whatever they had to say out of their memory. Knowing that what one participant knew about the gossiped-about person was not known by another participant, each student contributed eagerly whatever s/he knew to the group. Emboldened by the experience they had gained from the first round of gossip, some students began to add made-up gossip items into their talk, thus further enlivening the classroom atmosphere. It is to be acknowledged, however, that the majority of the students at this stage were occupied only with "Reported gossip", that is, a speaker framing an account of another's words as dialogue. Anyway, this type of production is still a lot better than when they say nothing as some researchers on sociolinguistics are optimistic that this discourse type can enhance our image of the individual speaking. Tannen (1996, P 109) claims that when a speaker represents an utterance as the words of another, what results is constructed dialogue. To conclude that the act of transforming others' words into one's own discourse is a creative and enlivening one, she further quotes Bakhtin ([1975] 1981:338), who observes that every conversation is full of transmissions and interpretations of other people's words. This activity took about 15 minutes but might have continued longer if I had not intervened to introduce the third phase of the activity.

The last activity was conducted by two handpicked, fluent students (two students who had studied in America for a few years) in front of the whole class. The purpose of this activity was to give the rest of the class a chance to watch the two students as their models while they were engaged in conversation. To do this activity, I made up a dramatic situation about the person being gossiped about and asked the two to expand on it. I created that dramatic situation by showing the following piece of information to the class on the overhead projector.

Obituary
Unexpected death of San

San, the founder of the Akyab lonely heart club, breathed his last while watching a pretty girl coming towards him with a red rose in her right hand and a handkerchief in her left hand. The funeral procession will ....

The students were allowed 3 minutes to reflect on this dramatic change of fate, and then the two most active and fluent students were called upon to come to the front of the classroom to discuss the topic **"THE SAN I USED TO KNOW"** while the remaining students watched them as their models. Though no particular instruction was given as to how that activity should be conducted, they built their discussion around the mysterious

nature of San's death, and kept the conversation going using whatever idea that struck them at that moment. The rest of the class just watched on, motivated by this display.

Conclusion

The speech activity presented in this article is not intended to teach students how to speak. Rather it is an attempt to help them to speak by making use of their feelings for other people around them. In fact, contemporary theorists in pragmatics are now emphasizing the importance of affect on language learning. Quoting Becker (1979), M.C. Bateson (1984), Friedrich (1986) and Tyler

(1978), Tannen states that emotion and cognition are inseparable. Understanding, she says, is facilitated, even enabled, by emotional experience of interpersonal involvement. Schumann (1994: 232) points out that emotion and cognition are distinguishable but inseparable. He concludes, therefore, that affect is an integral part of cognition. Though accuracy, in terms of formal correctness, cannot be achieved through this suggested activity, it definitely worked well with my students whose fluency in English was still below par. Through it, they were enabled to tap into the largely passive grammatical knowledge, and to extend their conversational range.

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