

The ULAT Home Page

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Activities and Topics to Promote Oral Expression

When we moved home to the United States, with 8 children, and after 13 years of mission work in northern France, we were largely penniless. Consequently, wanting to be near my wife's parents in their little farming village in Michigan's Thumb region, we rented an old and rather ramshackle farmhouse down a long dirt road in the middle of farm fields, half a mile from our closest neighbors. It was truly rundown, but we still bless the memory of the compassionate farmer, a friend of my father-in-law, who rented it to us for a mere \$200 a month because he knew we couldn't afford anything else. Unattractive enough that our children called it the "Chicken Coop", it was nonetheless a setting in which our children and the dog could run free and make all the noise they wanted without bothering anyone.



This is the "Chicken Coop" after I had pounded over 900 nails into the siding to keep out drafts and had added a paint job. The barely visible ladder on the right served as a fire escape and led to the Doorway to Nowhere.

The drafty old house had some interesting features – no exterior paint on the wooden siding when we moved in, a long ramp leading up to the front door from the gravel driveway, a floor that sloped downhill about a foot from one end of the kitchen to the other, a sheer drop-off with no railing on the second floor around the open stairway, a dirt floor in the basement, and a milk house (but no cows nor barn) in the backyard. Most memorable of all, however, was the Doorway to Nowhere.

The Doorway to Nowhere was located on the exterior wall of the second story bedroom into which we crammed all four of our youngest daughters. If one had the misfortune of opening the door and stepping through it, he or she would fall some 15 feet into the bushes below. Though no longer the case, it apparently had once been accompanied by an external stairway or fire escape. Wanting to keep all of our girls intact, we slid two heavy dressers in front of it and placed a ladder outside, for safety's sake, in the event of a fire.

Though it is my profound hope that the structure I have erected in the first 14 chapters of this book is somewhat more elegant than that of the "Chicken Coop", it would undoubtedly bear some resemblance to a Doorway to Nowhere if I didn't embellish it with at least one chapter devoted to some practical ideas for activities and topics designed to promote oral interaction.

My greatest complaint, looking back on my college methods class, was that it focused exclusively on practical activities to occupy students in the foreign language classroom, but never asked the question: "How do people learn a language anyway?" Lest I err in

the opposite direction, below you will find a list of concrete suggestions as to topics about which you can involve your students in oral participation as well as a few games and activities. However, remember! The teacher sets the example. When it comes to items number 3 and following, teachers encourage their students' participation by first being vulnerable and self-revealing when it comes to the topics proposed for discussion in class. It will greatly augment the students' willingness to share if their teacher first talks about his or her own life and, even more so, if the teacher's remarks can be accompanied by photos illustrating that aspect of his or her life. The following are some ideas for you.

1. The most frequent type of oral participation activity in my classes was that of reviewing a ULAT lesson that we were actively studying. While projecting the image of the lesson on the classroom screen, students are invited to form the statement being suggested by the images in each item. (The procedures relating to the selection of which student would be called on, and how their remarks are to be recorded and evaluated are found in the chapter entitled "Accountability".) If the students have been permitted to review the lesson prior to the oral participation session, only correct responses are accepted for oral participation credit. If they are approaching the lesson "cold", any reasonable response receives credit, though the teacher, of course, will explain the nature of any errors and will continue taking responses from other students until the correct one is found.
2. My favorite oral participation activity, and invariably that of my students as well, concerned discussing the content of a movie watched in class. Show your students a film in the target language, whether dubbed or in its original version, and break it into 10 to 15 minute segments. After showing a segment straight through without stopping, return in the video to the segment's beginning and freeze the video on images depicting key moments from the excerpt that they watched. Have the students start retelling you the story, providing all of the detail they can, both regarding what they can see in the still image and what they believe to be happening. As an aside, among the more hilarious aspects of this activity, particularly for the instructor, who understands more fully the story's plot, is what occurs when the students start to get sidetracked in retelling the story because of a misunderstanding on their part. After "stringing them along" for a time (because, after all, their oral participation is more important than their accuracy), the teacher can interject a brief statement of fact, without revealing too much of the story, to cause the students to pause, rethink their assumptions and restate their understanding of the story's plot.
3. The ULAT's first unit deals with the ability to present basic facts about one's life – one's name, age, home, family, chores, skills, interests, likes and dislikes, etc. Have your students create a PowerPoint presentation in which, through pictures and text in their native language, students make a self-presentation. While the

student shows the presentation to his or her classmates, the teacher steps out of the classroom. When the student has finished, the teacher re-enters the room and, in the target language, the students tell the teacher all that they have learned about their classmate. As this is a fairly lengthy activity, it can be used to conclude one or two classes per week, dealing with the life of one or two students per day.

4. When discussing the topics of one's daily routine and of telling time in Unit 2, simply ask the class to share at what time they get up, leave for school, get home after school, eat dinner, do their homework, go to bed, etc. Then ask them what they would change about their daily routine if they could. Of course, so early in their training, they will not be able to use the conditional mood in their response, so guide them to say the equivalent of "I want to...".
5. After presenting the modals in Unit 2, have the students write on a slip of paper and submit to you some sort of non-critical problem they are facing in their life (too much homework, a troublesome sibling, not enough sleep, etc.). Picking the slips at random, after identifying the student, have the rest of the class counsel their classmate about the problem, telling the student what he or she could do, can or cannot do, should or shouldn't do, must or mustn't do about the problem. Once all of the comments have been exhausted, to review the near future, have the student commit himself or herself by indicating what he or she is going to do.
6. While working on the present progressive tense in Unit 2, have the students tell you what they imagine their various family members are doing at that very moment. If you want to set them an example and demonstrate proper structure, call one of your own family members and, with your speaker phone on, have them tell the class and you about what they were doing when you called. Ideally, it would be a family member capable of speaking the language that you are teaching.
7. Interrogative words are presented in Unit 2 as well. You can lead students to practice their use by playing a game called "Jeopardy Tic-Tac-Toe", obviously a mixture of two popular games. It has as its goal to oblige students to form questions using interrogatives. Click [HERE](#) to download a spreadsheet containing 49 small squares in 7 columns and 7 rows. At the top of each column, you see the image from the ULAT representing one of the interrogatives the students have just learned. Under each interrogative, there are 7 squares in which you are to type a word, name, phrase or sentence that would be the response to a question the students could form using the interrogative at the top of the column. Ideally, you will want to make this game about things of personal interest to your students and therefore the items you enter in the 7 squares in each column would deal with things and people all of your students know - very

likely people, places or things in your school or town. For example, under "Who?" (column 1), you might type the name of a student on your school's basketball team. A question the students could easily form, which receives that answer, would be "Who plays basketball at (name of your school)?" You would fill the remaining 6 squares in that column with the names of other people commonly associated with some activity, skill or trait. Under "What?", you might enter, "we sleep", and the students would have to form the question, "What do we do in math class?" Of course, to receive credit, the students can form any question that would receive that particular answer. The game proceeds in the following manner:

- a. The teacher divides the students into two teams and establishes an order in which they are to speak.
 - b. One team is selected to go first and its first member says one of the interrogatives and then a number from 1 to 7, with 1 meaning the top square and 7 meaning the bottom one.
 - c. If the student forms a grammatically correct question that properly corresponds to the answer he or she selected, then the answer is deleted and a symbol representing that team is placed in the square and the next member of that student's team is allowed to select another square.
 - d. If the student's question is incorrectly stated or does not fit the answer, it becomes the other team's turn to try to form questions.
 - e. The game ends when one of the teams has 7 symbols stretching in a straight horizontal, vertical or diagonal line indicating that they have formed correct questions to the answers in those seven consecutive squares.
8. The Identity Game is also useful when studying interrogatives however, if teachers keep all of the **forms** from all of their classes and mix them together, it is a game that the students enjoy and that can be played all year long when they have a few moments left at the end of a class period. It is very simple to play. Once the forms are collected, the teacher selects a form at random and does not inform the students of the identity of the person described in the form. The students have to ask questions using an interrogative to determine the student's identity. Of course, they may not ask: "What is his/her name?" Each question asked should be awarded oral participation credit. When first used during lesson 2.2, the teacher will have to provide the students with a little help, such as writing the time on the board at which a student says that he or she arrives at school, since telling time takes place later in that unit. One bit of advice, do not allow students to guess their classmate's identity until they have asked at least three

questions and then, before being allowed to guess, they must always ask a question first.

9. Unit 3 deals with people description – physical appearance, emotions, clothing and colors and family relationships. There are two games you can play that students enjoy very much.

First, divide the class into two teams and then have two members from each team go into the hall and sit at random order in the four chairs you have placed there. Then, with these four students out of sight, have members of each team ask questions about the physical appearance and clothing of the individuals sitting in Chair 1, Chair 2, Chair 3 or Chair 4. The questions may only receive a "Yes" or "No" answer from the teacher, who is standing in the doorway, able to see both the students in class and those sitting in the hall. After the first 3 students from each team have asked a question and gotten a response, allow them to try to guess the identity of the student sitting in each chair. If they are incorrect, the other team asks a new question and then guesses the order. The winning team is the one whose member identifies the correct order in which the four students are sitting.

A second game requires teachers to stroll about the school hallways, probably before school begins, and to take pictures of random students in the hallway (after asking their permission). The teachers then turn off their video projector so that only they can see these pictures on their computer screen. At that point, they allow students to ask "Yes/No" questions about the student's physical appearance and clothing worn that day to determine the student's identity. (Is it a girl? Is she wearing a skirt? Is the skirt blue? Is she tall?) Depending on the size of the school, it may be necessary to provide clues (He's a member of the basketball team. He is bilingual.) and to restrict the students you choose to photograph to those in the same grade level as those in the language class. Once someone has correctly identified the student, the teacher turns on the projector and summarizes the characteristics previously mentioned by the students.

10. Though not a game, this activity helps reinforce the students' knowledge of vocabulary relating to a three-generational family and is one that students enjoy very much. The students are given a sheet of paper with two almost empty [family trees](#) to complete – one for their family and, later in the activity, one for that of a classmate. The only space on their family tree that is filled in is their own, both on their mother's side of the family and on their father's. Here are the steps to follow:

- a. Without showing their family tree to their classmates, they are first to write their father's last name and their mother's maiden name at the top of each side of their genealogy.
 - b. Next, using first names only, they are to add the names of their grandparents on both sides. (If they do not know the name of any person in their family tree, or if no one occupies that spot, as could be the case with uncles, aunts, siblings and cousins, they are simply to make up a name and write it in the appropriate space.)
 - c. The students then complete the rest of their family tree with the first name of parents, siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins. Obviously, as the sheet is limited in space, they must select only 1 or 2 people per category. For example, they may have 8 siblings, but they may only write down the name of one of them (possibly the oldest).
 - d. Finally, still without showing their family trees to one another, have the students sit back-to-back, without looking at one another's chart, and have them dictate their chart to their partner saying, for example, "Jim is my mother's father, so he is my grandfather. Mary is Jim's wife, so she is my grandmother." Their partner then transcribes the names onto the empty family tree at the bottom of his or her sheet. Once each student has communicated the names of their family members, still without revealing their charts or looking at their partner's, the students try to read what they have understood back to their partner.
 - e. Of course, having the teacher first dictate his or her family tree to the entire class and then, afterwards, requiring the students to repeat back what they understood for oral participation credit, is a good way to start this activity. And, by the way, this activity can also serve as an excellent review of the alphabet as they are obliged to spell difficult names to one another.
11. The focus of the vocabulary in Unit 4 is domestic life - the home, household chores, food and food preparation, as well as prepositions of spatial relationships (in, on, at, through, etc.). Take a picture of a frontal view of the exterior of your home, including your driveway, garage, lawn, flower gardens, etc., and without showing it to your students, describe it to them and have them try to draw a picture of it. Then, for oral participation credit, as always, have them describe it back to you, one aspect at a time, as you draw it according to their description on your classroom's whiteboard. Afterward, display your actual photograph on the screen and have them describe the discrepancies they see between their understanding of the appearance of your home and reality.
 12. Starting with your front door, take pictures of the interior of your home as though you were giving your students a guided tour. As you move from room to room,

tell them the direction in which you are going with them and then, once you have arrived in a room, tell its name, describe its furnishings and then tell some of the things that you do in each room. Once you have finished your guided tour, show it again and have your students describe the movement through the house and the details you provided about each room.

13. Unit 5 contains a series of exclusively written exercises. Therefore, we'll move on to Unit 6. In Unit 6, the emphasis is on urban life. Show your students various street scenes and simply have them describe them. When they mention a place of business or institution, have them tell you what people do at those locations.
14. Using a program such as Google Earth, take your students to some random location in a city in which the language you are studying is the native language and have your students both describe the scene and talk about the differences they notice between that scene and what they see in such a location in their own country.
15. Since Unit 6 also develops the ability to give directions to help someone find a certain location in a city (train station, store, church, etc.), show your students an overhead view of your town on your classroom screen and tell them that you want to go to some well-known location in it. Have them give you directions to that location and then, with a pointer or with your finger, follow the route they have designated – even if it is incorrect – and then make them redirect you if their initial instructions were poor.
16. The simple past tense is presented in Unit 6. Simply ask your students to tell you what they did yesterday or what they did last night. As simple as this is, you will be surprised to notice how interested they are to hear these facts about the goings-on in their classmates' lives.

To develop the past tense further, ask your students to tell you about certain milestones in their lives. Ask them: "Where were you born?", "When did you start playing soccer/playing the piano/learning Spanish?", "When did you get your driver's license?", "What did you do last summer?"

17. Unit 6 presents object pronouns as well. A very simple activity you can perform to help reinforce their understanding of the proper position of the object pronoun in a sentence is to ask them to tell you why they appreciate both their parents and their friends. Invariably, they will need to use object pronouns in their sentences – "They love me." "They listen to me." "They help me with my homework." "They buy me clothes." "They encourage me." "They know me." (I suppose you could probably ask the opposite about their siblings – "They annoy me." "They make me mad.") Hearing the multiplicity of responses will very naturally help them integrate the proper sentence structure into their thinking.

18. Unit 7 has the world as its vocabulary's focus (geopolitical boundaries, languages, nationalities, topography, weather, plants and animals). On a grammatical level, it presents the perfect tense and the imperfect.

Ask your students questions about the best vacation their family ever took. In the process, you will also be reviewing the past simple and helping them distinguish between the past simple and imperfect, or an equivalent form in the language you are teaching. You can ask them questions such as:

- a. Where did you go?
 - b. What differences did you notice between (people of the student's own culture) and (members of the local culture they were visiting)?
 - c. What language did you speak while you were there?
 - d. What was the weather like?
 - e. What different kinds of animals did you see there and what kinds did you not see that are common here?
 - f. What was the scenery like?
 - g. What did you do while you were there?
 - h. Why was it your favorite vacation spot?
19. To reinforce the present perfect, and its distinction from the past simple, ask the students if they have ever done any number of random activities that they might well never have done and how often or how many times. For example, ask if they have ever left the country, gone skiing, prepared dinner for their family, sung solo in public, seen a crime, bought or driven a car, spoken the target language to someone who did not know their native language, etc. Once they have responded in the present perfect, oblige them to use the past simple by asking more detailed questions, such as: "When did this take place?" "Where were you?" "With whom did you do this?" Even better, to elicit the participation of more students, have the students ask these questions of one another.
20. A very simple activity to develop the imperfect, yet very interesting because of the topic, ask your students to tell you about things that they used to do when they were little children that they don't do any more. (Don't forget that in all of these ideas being shared, teachers are the ones to set the example by first sharing about themselves. In this example, if teachers can show early photos of themselves actually doing the things they mention, so much the better.)

21. In Unit 8, students learn how to describe tools, technology and manual activities. Bring into class some common household technology or appliances (mixer, vacuum cleaner, radio, etc.), but leave the items in the hallway where the students cannot see them or set up some sort of barrier, such as a curtain, between the item and them. Have the students ask you questions that receive only "Yes" or "No" answers regarding the appearance and composition of this object in order to finally guess what it is. Once the students have guessed what the object is, "play dumb", pretend that you don't understand how it functions and make them explain to you how to turn it on, how to modify its settings, how to use it, etc.

22. When dealing with the future tense in Unit 8, simply have the students tell you where they plan to live and what they plan to do after graduation from high school and/or from college. For the subjunctive mood and the conditional, ask them about things that they don't like in the school (subjunctive) and what they would do differently (conditional). For "if clauses", ask them questions about hypothetical situations, such as: "If you don't have any homework this evening, what will you do?", "If your father or mother didn't prepare dinner for you this evening, what would you do?", "If you had a million dollars, what would you do with your money?"

The possible topics and activities to stimulate oral interaction are innumerable. However, the key to success with all of them is to be vulnerable yourself and to set the example, to weight the oral participation grade heavily enough to reflect your seriousness regarding their actually learning to speak the language you are teaching, to hold students accountable for regularly volunteering responses and being generous with praise, dealing gently with the correction of their errors and moving only progressively toward the refinement of their speech.

Dynamic oral participation will require the teacher's vulnerability, the proper weighting of the oral participation grade, holding students accountable for participation, lavish praise and a commitment to progressive, non-critical refinement of students' speech.

[NEXT CHAPTER](#)