

Professional Practice Issues

Avoiding the Avoidance Strategy

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Some teachers of a foreign language might feel frustrated when, after having designed a free language production activity to focus on the use of a new grammar structure their learners have been practicing, the students accomplish the task by using other communicative means. Teachers might think that learners, after the presentation stage and the controlled practices of a particular grammar structure being taught, would continue to use this structure in subsequent genuine language production activities. However, class experience shows teachers that many of them do not.

For example, in a free language practice activity intended to promote the students' production of the formation "would" to describe the habitual past, it was soon discovered that the students instead were resorting to the more familiar formation "used to." Instead of saying "as a child, I would play with toys", they would say "as a child, I used to play with toys."

Many teachers can say that this is exactly what would be expected from a real free language production task. Others might add that there are no real-life language production activities inside a classroom. However, teachers can still design activities which are less controlled and fulfill a communicative purpose in which learners will combine their current language skills with the structure which has not yet been internalized.

A specific activity for free language production entitled "Remembering a Tradition in My Family" was designed to prevent the use of this avoidance strategy (using "used to" instead of "would"). This activity focussed on the use of the unfamiliar "would" formation by the students, all the while maintaining a high degree of interest and motivation in the task.

In order to plan a successful activity of this type, teachers have to keep in mind the use of the avoidance strategy by the students who feel insecure with the new language or

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by those who are just not accustomed to using it because the new language is still in the recognition stage. Bygate (1987:47) describes the avoidance strategy as a learner communication strategy in which the learner alters the message by using other means, such as substitution or reduction of content, to overcome the difficulty posed by the intended means of communication. Moreover, Rubin not only adds to this definition but captures the essence of the problem caused by the use of this communication strategy:

As Tarone (1977) has noted, many learners may use an avoidance strategy in production: avoiding words, phrases or topics with which they may be uncomfortable and using others instead to remain in the conversation. Such strategies promote communication but are not directly related to learning since learners are using what they know and not directly addressing areas of confusion.

(Rubin, 1987: 26)

As mentioned, an activity that prevents the use of the avoidance strategy was specially designed for a group of students of a low-advanced level of English who were at that time practicing the use of the modal "would" for the habitual past. After doing several activities for freer practice, the students were found to be using the avoidance strategy. They were substituting the modal "would" for the structure "used to" which was learned at the intermediate level and was already internalized by them. In addition, when the controlled phase was taking place, they were surprised that the modal "would" was being used to talk about the past. Because of these conditions, it became necessary to create an activity that would promote the use of the mentioned structure, prevent the use of the avoidance strategy, and be a genuine language production activity.

In order to design this activity, consideration was given to the ideas given by authors such as Rinvolucri (1984:1-2), who states the importance of the topic, the focus, and of a hidden agenda when describing communicative grammar games. He writes that "[i]n these exercises the students are asked to write and say things about themselves and people who are significant to them within a set of structures prescribed by the teacher." He also adds that "[t]he students' focus is on what they are saying and not on the form they are using." In addition, Batstone (1994:46) discusses proceduralization by means of the use of communicative activities by stating that "... it is through the experience of language use that knowledge becomes proceduralized." and that "[o]pportunities for language use in the classroom are vital." He defines proceduralization as "...the process of forming and mentally storing language routines through experience in language use". However, he also warns of the need to be careful when designing activities which fuse classroom interaction with language use since not every kind of communicative activity will be successful.

Therefore, after considering the issues of topic, students' background knowledge, focus on meaning, a hidden agenda, the avoidance strategy, and purposes of communica-

tive activities, the activity "Remembering a Tradition in My Family" was designed.

For this group work activity, the learners contributed to the class by bringing in their background knowledge to talk about traditions in the past. They were using the modal "would" for habitual past to fill in a form designed for this special task. And at the conclusion of the activity, a representative of each group reported to the class. A detailed description follows.

First, the students were engaged in the topic of family traditions in their own culture by using the whole class discussion technique. The teacher elicited from the students what they thought a tradition was and what different family traditions they knew about.

Second, the teacher also modelled the activity using the desired structure when giving an example of one of her own family traditions, offering flowers to the Holy Virgin in the month of May.

Third, the students in groups discussed several traditions of their own and chose one which was familiar to every member of the group.

Fourth, students filled in the following form, specifying what each member of their family would do to celebrate the tradition chosen.

REMEMBERING A TRADITION IN MY FAMILY
FAMILY MEMBER WOULD DO

Fifth, one member of the group reported to the class the information gathered by their group.

This activity was found to be successful because the objective was achieved. As stated before, the main objective was to design a genuine language production task focussed on the use of the "would" formation for habitual past as a hidden agenda. During the activity, the students were concentrating on meaning and not on form. At the same time, they were using the structure the teacher wanted them to use in a communicative and natural way. The students contributed eagerly because it was a personalized and meaningful task. Thus, collaborative learning was promoted. The topic was built from the learners' background knowledge, resulting in the topic being motivating and fun. This in turn, generated an abundance of genuine speech, and the filling in of the form prevented them from employing the avoidance strategy. This activity might be found useful for other teachers who face a similar problem or perhaps it may give them ideas to design new ones.

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