



Organizing and Retrieving Classroom Activities with Database Software

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Over the years, I have collected hundreds of activities for the language classroom in the form of photocopiable resource books, electronic documents, and copy-masters filed in boxes. Until a couple of years ago, I frequently found myself wanting an activity on a certain topic or language point but with no idea whether I had something suitable or where to find it. I was then torn between embarking on a time-consuming search or (re)creating an activity from scratch.

One day, while working with EndNote (Mac/Windows), a bibliographic database application, I realized that I needed something similar for my collection of activities. The closest thing at hand was the database module in the now antiquated *AppleWorks for*

Macintosh, and though it was my first attempt at organizing a database, in one afternoon I was well on my way to developing a tool that has paid many dividends. My database now contains over 1,600 activities and continues to expand as time permits. In this article, I would like to share some key points for developing such a database and suggestions for sharing such resources.

Setting Up and Using a Database

The first step in setting up an activities database with applications like *FileMaker* (Mac/Windows), *AppleWorks*(Mac/Windows), or *MS Access* (Windows) is to design a simple record template such as the one in Figure 1. (A separate section on using *MS Excel* appears below.) The template contains fields for each piece of information arranged for convenient viewing. One field in my database is *Book/Folder* where I put information about the location of an activity like the name of a published book, a folder on a hard disk, or a file in a drawer. Other fields include *Title/Filename*, *Language Level*, *Language Point*, *Topic*, *Activity Number*, *Page Number*, and *Rec?* (where I mark particularly good activities). You simply click and drag to create fields, name them, and designate what type of data, such as text, numbers, or images, will go into each. Even after using a database for some time, it is easy to add new fields as the need arises. For example, you may wish to add a *Notes* field with important tips for setting up and running activities or a *Materials* field for a list of necessary materials (e.g., scissors, magnets, or CD player).

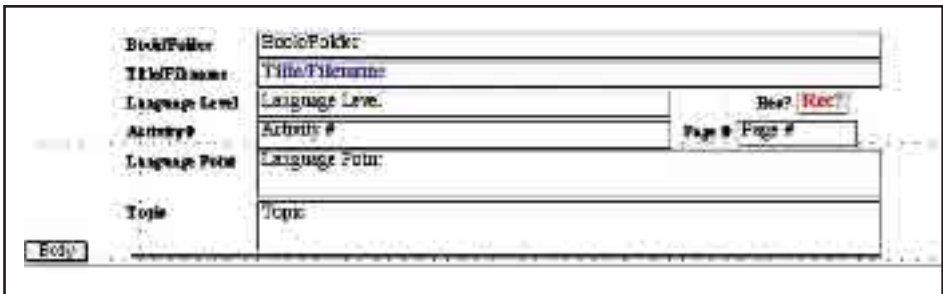


Figure 1: Data Record Template

Once the template is set up, it is an easy but time-consuming process to type in the information for each activity. For a group of records all sharing some information such as the book title and language level, save work by typing the information into one record and using duplicate or copy & paste commands to create multiple identical records. Then fill

in the remaining fields in each record one-by-one. A completed data record may look like Figure 2, and a screen shot showing several records can be seen in Figure 3.

Book/Folder	Ready-Made English 1	
Title/ID/name	Sentence Tracks	
Language Level	UE	Rec?
Activity#	11	Page # 11
Language Point	Ordering words & sentences	
Topic	Putting together words & sentences to make story	

Figure 2: Example Data Record

Activities Database DB (DB)		
Book/Folder	Cambridge Business English Activities	
Title/ID/name	My working day	
Language Level	B	Rec?
Activity#	8.3	Page # 91
Language Point	Modals of possibility	
Topic	Describing museum & jobs. Describing a work routine	
Book/Folder	Cambridge Business English Activities	
Title/ID/name	A conference your head?	
Language Level	C1	Rec?
Activity#	9.1	Page # 93
Language Point	Instructions	
Topic	Describing processes: Organizing a process description	
Book/Folder	Cambridge Business English Activities	
Title/ID/name	The process figure	
Language Level	C	Rec?
Activity#	9.2	Page # 95
Language Point	Culture and referential words	
Topic	Describing processes: Making the object and a process with key words	

Figure 3: Database Window

Fortunately, there are additional shortcuts to save time with data entry. Detailed tables of contents in many activity books offer most or all of the information needed for database entries. Begin by scanning the table of contents and using optical character recognition (OCR) software to convert the information to a text file. I have contacted most major publishers regarding this form of limited copying and have received no objections to scanning the table of contents. Prepare the resulting text file by deleting unneeded details and arranging all information for each activity in one line or paragraph, separating each piece of information with a tab and separating each activity with a hard return or paragraph mark. The file can now be easily imported with the database application, designating the import source as a “tab-delimited file.” Fortunately, most database applications allow you to adjust the mapping of information in the text file to data fields in the database prior to import. An example is pictured in Figure 4. Publishers’ online catalogs and product descriptions from online booksellers are other sources of similar information. These also can be copied, cleaned up, and imported.



Figure 4: Database Import Facility Allowing Correct Mapping of Data Fields

Even with shortcuts, inputting data can be time-consuming, but once you have the information in an accessible form, you can use it for years enjoying lightning-fast retrieval simply by typing in key words. Most applications allow general searches for a word or text-string in any field and specific searches limited to particular fields (e.g., *Topic*) or combinations of fields (e.g., *Topic* and *Recommended*). For example, in seconds I can locate the 15 activities I have that deal with “habits,” browse through them, and know just where to lay my hands on the one I want, for example, the record that appears in Figure 5.

Book/Folder	Pair Work 1	
Title/Filename	Questionnaire: habits and daily routines	
Language Level	E - High E	Rec?
Activity #	13	Page # : 3
Language Point	Adverbs of frequency, Do questions about habits & routines	
Topic	Sharing info about personal habits & routines	

Figure 5: One Search Result for “Habits”

Using MS Excel

The ubiquitous spreadsheet application *MS Excel* (Mac/Windows), or similar software, also serves as a perfectly usable, searchable database platform. Each row holds information for a separate activity while each column contains a particular type of information, such as *Title/Filename*, *Language Point*, and *Topic*. Data is easily imported from text files, and *Excel* files can, in turn, be imported by database applications. If you select the “wrap text” cell format option to allow a more compact, convenient viewing layout, the results look like the example shown in Figure 6.

Book	Activity Title	Act. #	Lang. Level	Language Point	Topic	Page
Cambridge Business English Activities	My working day	83	E	Means of possibility	Describing companies & jobs Describing a work routine	81
Cambridge Business English Activities	A roof over your head?	91	UI	Instructions	Describing processes: Explaining a process description	83
Cambridge Business English Activities	The process here	93	E	Advanced infinitival words	Describing processes: Making the stages of a process with key words	93

Figure 6: MS Excel Database Sample

Sharing data

While organizing information on self-generated activities is an individual task, sharing database entries for published materials could save other instructors considerable time and effort. Towards that end, I have set up a website from which anyone can download tab-delimited text files with database entries for activity books that I have cataloged. Publishers have been very cooperative in allowing the posting of this information, since the activities themselves are not posted, and it enhances potential usability of their products. I would also be happy to host or provide links for database

files from others. Simply follow the instructions that appear on my website at <http://www.geocities.com/kjschjp/activ_db/index.html>.

It is my hope that publishers will eventually include this type of enhanced table of contents with the promotional materials on their websites. Besides giving customers a more complete picture of book content, they will be providing a valuable service to the teaching community by making their materials easier to find and use with minimal time and effort.

Conclusion

After spending the time and money to develop a collection of activities, it makes sense for a teacher to maximize this investment with a simple database to make future retrieval as efficient as possible. Building such a database is not complicated, and if other teachers and publishers join in sharing such information, the process could become even easier.

About the Author

Ken Schmidt teaches EFL and is an Associate Professor at Tohoku Fukushi University in Sendai, Japan. His interests include task design, extensive reading, self-access learning, and learner perceptions of learning activities.