

# TOWARD COMMUNICATIVE AND "ANN"

By Kenneth G. Aitken

One of the most abused rights of the second language learner is the right to make a mistake. There is a tendency by ESL teachers to control classroom conversations and impose corrections on students so that only the most audacious students speak out. The other students speak only when spoken to. Hence, few mistakes are made in the classroom, and the teacher assumes the language is being learned. Although teachers claim to be teaching their students how to use a second language, there is a lack of free, meaningful conversation in most ESL classrooms. Seldom do we provide opportunities for students to communicate their feelings on issues, problems, and experiences.

David Wolfe (1967) suggests that progress towards natural, meaningful conversation in the ESL classroom is hindered by the artificiality of language learning through drills and exercises that force the student to lie. He says that from the point of view of true communication sentences like

'Yesterday I went to the movies.

'Last night I went to the game.

'Last week I went to the game.

border on the nonsensical. Stern (1970) concurs when he writes that teachers are often so preoccupied with the forms of language, the patterns of sentences, points of pronunciation, etc., that they entirely forget that language is used for communication of something to somebody. Yet the basic goal of TESL is to enable the student to successfully send and receive messages of his/her choice in English. Oller (1971) tells us that to accomplish this goal we must involve the student in active, meaningful communication in the target language--the sooner, the better.

In this article I will discuss one way I have used to involve intermediate level, adult ESL students in active communication using selected letters from the "Dear Abby" and "Ann Landers" columns in

the daily newspapers.

The technique I employ in conversation sessions is based on the notion that certain communication activities are easier than others, and that certain easy activities tend to "warm up" the conversationalists so that they feel more comfortable and are therefore more willing to respond to others. The communication activities, from easiest to most difficult, that I use are: listening to one person speaking or reading aloud; talking and listening to two friends; reporting to a group of twenty acquaintances on the ideas and opinions of oneself and friends; and writing to a stranger giving advice that has been requested.

At the beginning of the session each student is given a copy of the letter to Dear Abby, or Ann Landers, that is the topic of discussion for the day. The response, however, is not supplied at this time. The teacher reads the letter aloud while the students follow the text. Following this, the teacher explains any vocabulary items or idioms that may be confusing to the students. (This should be kept as brief as possible.) The key issue in the letter is identified at this point. Initially the teacher might point it out and write it on the board. However, after some experience, the students should be asked to identify the issue during the small group discussions (Farid 1974).

The students are grouped in triads (groups of three) and asked to discuss, and respond to, the issue, question or whatever has been raised in the letter. In my experience, few students have wasted the opportunity to speak in English in these unsupervised conversations. In selecting those who are in each triad, it is wise to put your outspoken and opinionated students together so they can struggle in a group, rather than dominate conversation in a triad that has two less vocal students.

# COMPETENCE WITH "ABBY"

With the outspoken students no longer monopolizing the conversation, the other students can, and do, have lively and stimulating conversations in English.

Before the topic has been completely 'milked dry' in the small group discussion, the groups are gathered together into a larger group discussion. For best results I have found that when sitting in a circle, without wide gaps or empty places between them, the students and teacher can carry on the conversation with maximum participation. The teacher now functions as a moderator and draws out of the group member's reports and discussion what was discussed in the triads.

During all these discussions the teacher makes no corrections of student errors. The students are encouraged to share their thoughts on the issue and not to focus on the language. The teacher should treat each response with respect.

If interest in the topic is keen, the teacher may ask the class to write a response to the letter. The response should be brief, and in letter form. I have found that students at this stage request some feedback on correctness of grammar. In reading and marking the letters the teacher should comment on a limited number of grammatical points, as well as on the content.

After the class has experienced a number of such communication sessions, they become used to the routine and begin to make generalizations about North American cultural patterns. When they reach this stage, rather than focus on the problem raised in a letter to a column, the teacher might direct the class to focus on the cultural implications raised by these types of newspaper columns. Blatchford (1973) suggests that a selection of many columns with a cultural focus, with the columnists' responses, be made available to the students. The groups then could come to grips with questions like:

'What bothers Americans?

'Why do they write to an impersonal party for professional advice?

'Why can't people discuss problems openly with friends or associates and get immediate help?'

These questions could be handled in the same way as the columns themselves were handled, moving through the various communication activities.

Someone is sure to object to these types of communication activities because they are uncontrolled. However Dulay and Burt (1973) have argued that the most important characteristic of a natural communication situation is that the attention of the speaker and hearer is on the content of the verbal exchange, rather than on its form. Yet we note that most language teachers and language materials focus on the structure to be taught. Frequently this results in messages meaningless to both teachers and students. "This may be because language teachers are supposed to teach language and not anything else, just as social studies teachers, or science teachers are supposed to teach social studies or science." (Dulay and Burt 1973:257). The fallacy is, that language is 'form' and cannot reasonably be compared to subject matter, which is 'content'. Communication activities, such as those I have discussed here, place emphasis on meaning and information exchange, and are steps to putting some content into ESL classes.

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(continued on page 14)





# Toward Communicative Competence

(continued from page 7)

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