

Creative familiarisation activities on young learner teachers' courses

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I would like to describe three familiarisation activities I sometimes use on short intensive young learner teacher in-service courses. I will then comment on the opportunities I feel they provide for teachers to be creative, and will conclude with a brief consideration of what these activities can offer the young learner teacher trainer. For reasons of space I will not attempt to define the term *creativity*, and will consider the terms *activity* and *task* to be synonyms.

Activity 1: Getting to know the trainer

Materials needed

Objects connected with the trainer in some way. I try to prepare a mix of documents, pictures and objects.

Procedure

1. Divide teachers into groups
2. Write on the board *We know...We think.....We wonder*
3. Tell teachers that they will look at objects related to your life and that each group should use the objects as a basis for writing three sentences under each heading respectively. So if objects include a birth certificate, a football season ticket, and jar of Marmite, example sentences might be *We know you were born in 1958, We think you like football. We wonder what Marmite is.*
4. Hand out objects to each group, who discuss, and make notes under the categories. Deal with questions as you monitor.
5. After a few minutes ask groups to swap objects and repeat step 4.
6. Repeat steps 4 and 5 until each group has had the chance to see all the objects.
7. Get feedback from the groups in plenary, and deal with any questions that arise.
8. Discuss ways of adapting this activity to teachers' own classrooms.

Activity 2: Getting to know each other

Materials needed

Dice, counters, and copies of the example board game below. This idea is adapted from the *Values Topics Board Game* in Klippel (1984). (See page 28)

Procedure

1. Teachers throw the dice and move their counter forward accordingly. They tell others in their group about the topic they land on. If a teacher lands on a 'free question' square, others can each ask them a question. A teacher can refuse to answer

a question if they feel it is too personal, or if they have no experience of the topic referred to on their square.

2. After an agreed time limit, find out in plenary what teachers learned about each other.
3. Discuss ways of adjusting the activity to suit teachers' own contexts

Activity 3: Getting to know the course building

Materials

A pen and piece of paper for each group of teachers.

Procedure

1. Briefly show teachers around the building they will be working in for the duration of the course.
2. Now that teachers have some idea of what's in the building, divide them into groups, and assign sections of the alphabet to each group.
3. Set a time limit, and ask teachers to find examples of things in the building beginning with their designated letters.
4. Get feedback in plenary or jigsaw groups, and deal with any questions that arise
5. Discuss of ways of adapting this activity to a young learner context.

What opportunities do these activities offer for teachers to be creative?

In activity 1 participants often ask questions about the meaning of objects or documents they see. They may be intrigued for example, by documents such as marriage certificates, driving licences, or Criminal Record Bureau disclosure checks. Questions about the function and content of some documents and the significance of some objects tends to follow, as do comparisons with similar documents or objects in teachers' own countries. I have found that similar opportunities arise from activities 2 and 3, as participants may want to compare professional development opportunities available in their own contexts, or to ask about books, people or facilities seen during a tour of the building. In sum, the slightly open-ended nature of all three activities provides opportunities for teachers to make sense (Donaldson 1978) from input. In addition, the challenge of content, language and the task and the support available from peers and the trainer tends to mean that teachers can find out and learn as much as they want to. This feature of the activities links to Lynne Cameron's highlighting of

Activity 2 - Getting to know each other

A book which helped you to develop	An essential tool in your job	Three qualities needed in your job	Free question (Others each ask you)	Three reasons you had for coming on this course
A colleague you respect	A person who has helped you to develop professionally	Your office/ staffroom	An area of skills or knowledge you would like to develop	Free question (Others each ask you)
One of the best features of your job	A role you play/have played in someone else's development	A good course for teachers you have attended	Free question (Others each ask you)	An aspect of your work you dislike
A major educational change in your country in the last five years	How you plan to share information/ ideas from this course with colleagues when you go back to work	Free question (Others each ask you)	Something you know about this course	Your previous job
A strategy you have for managing your time at work	Free question (Others each ask you)	A professional skill/strength you think you have	The job you hope to be doing in five years' time	One way you use to develop your own knowledge or skills.

creativity coming about through learners noticing gaps in their own understanding in her article in this issue of **CATS**.

In the same article, Cameron also mentions subversion as a feature of creativity, and I would say that all three activities provide potential for teachers to be creative in this way. The sentence stems allow teachers to respond in ways not directly connected to the objects themselves. Some teachers, for example, complete the stems with phrases such as We wonder what you're not showing us, or We think we know why we are doing this. In activity 3, many teachers find imaginative or subversive solutions to difficult letters such as Q, X and Z .

In activity 2, scope for subversion is more limited, but choices teachers can make in the way they do the activity allow for a degree of creativity, I feel. They need to decide, for example, where they will start on the board (e.g. top or bottom right or left hand corners), which direction they will move the counters in, whether they will all start from the same place or, for example, continue from the place the previous thrower of the dice finished at. They also have a choice of whether to go for depth or spread in their discussion. Some groups like to spend a long time on each question, and may move into areas not directly related to the question, such as teachers' pay, teachers' status, and so on. Some groups, on the contrary, like to keep a brisk pace. Other groups will tend to vary their pace according to the level of interest they perceive in the question. In activity 3, teachers are faced with choices about learning strategies they will use. Discussion of these choices is often explicit. Groups may agree to allocate different letters to different group members for example, or to work together on each letter. Alternatively, they may walk around the building individually or in pairs and pool their findings as a group later on.

How can using creative familiarisation activities help the trainer?

The first obvious benefit is that the activities themselves mirror to some extent the kinds of activities many teachers might use with their own young learner classes. Teachers usually want to make comments and ask questions about the value of these activities. In this sense, the activities lend themselves well to discussion of theories underpinning young learner learning and development. Discussion often centres around aspects of learning such as opportunities for children to make sense of language, the need for support and challenge in class, ownership of language, learning strategies, and learning styles. The specific context of the activities just experienced tends to provide a shared frame of reference for this discussion. Ramani (1987) is one of many writers

who argue persuasively for the value of starting from practical experience as a way of developing a personal theory of teaching and learning.

Secondly, teachers' responses during the activities and after them can help the trainer to find out about their values, attitudes and beliefs. If a number of teachers comment that different finishing times in activities like this tends to create discipline problems, for instance, the trainer may perhaps use this information to fine-tune course design.

Thirdly, there is a practical consideration. While the activities provide discussion material for teachers and diagnostic information for the trainer they are also relatively simple for the trainer to prepare. In Grant's words(1987), these familiarisation activities have a high surrender value in that the effort put in to preparing them tends to justify the results achieved.

Summary

I have described three familiarisation activities used at the start of short methodology courses for teachers of English to young learners. I have highlighted the chances they provide for teachers to create their own meaning, to interpret their task creatively and to make choices in organising their work. I have also commented that in my experience the activities often provide the trainer with useful discussion material, information about teachers' values and beliefs, and a good return on preparation time.

References

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