

# What learners want! Tailor-made activities

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We have developed tailor-made information gap activities after consultations with learners as to the content, length, and level of difficulty. A primary reason for this is that textbooks, while fulfilling some of our learners' conversational needs, are not always able to satisfy their desire for conversational practice about subjects in which they are interested nor are they always pertinent enough to their life experiences. We believe that as teachers we must listen to our learners' requests. We therefore ask our learners in an ongoing process to tell us the kind of conversations they want to learn. Their responses have included: talking about Japan's culture; inquiring about other countries' cultures and other everyday topics such as ordering food in restaurants, talking about sports, and shopping. The activities are then developed and designed for learners to complete while working together in pairs. We try to keep the linguistic structures at our learners' levels.

私達は、英語のアクティビティの内容、長さ、難易度を学習者の意見を聞いて、オーダーメイド形式で作成しました。なぜなら、教科書学習では、彼らの生活に沿った、彼らの習いたい英語学習を満足させることが難しいからです。私達は、まず学習者から彼らのリクエストを取り入れることが大事だと思います。そこで、学習者に英語で何を学習したいかを伝えてもらいます。彼らの答えはさまざまで、日本文化について英語で話したい、また外国の文化を知りたい、日常的なレストランでの注文、スポーツについて、ショッピングについて英語で会話をしたいとさまざまです。この教育方法は、2人ペアとなってする学習をもとに作成しました。学習者のレベルに合わせた語学教育を軸に作成されました。

**F**ollowing Krashen (1981), we believe that “the major function of the second language conversation classroom is to provide intake for acquisition” (p.102). However, Krashen goes on to point out that “providing intake via meaningful and communicative activities is quite a challenging task. In order to qualify as intake, these exercises must be understood, be at the appropriate level, and be ‘natural’” (p.102). For this reason the texts and activities that we have designed have been made specifically for our learners (Ls).

### The three criteria for input to qualify as intake

Krashen identifies three main conditions necessary for input to become intake. The first of these is that intake must be understood. We think we have addressed this issue by asking our Ls exactly what kind of themes or topics they want the conversational activities to be about in class. Each L has a chance to identify the topic or topics in which she would like to become proficient. It might be a topic such as current events, movies, deciding on a restaurant, or shopping. We then create our text and activity based on our Ls' wishes. Since the texts are made with our Ls' requests in mind, they have a head start in understanding them.

Krashen's second condition is that the exercise or activity must be at an appropriate linguistic level for the Ls. Since we meet and speak with our Ls at least once a week, we consider ourselves to be the best judges of what level of English is appropriate to include in the texts. We are certainly more qualified than textbook writers who have never met our students.

The third condition, that the activity must be *natural*, is the most difficult to achieve, as our texts are created from our imagination rather than being extracted from naturally occurring conversations. However, we bring to the text-writing activity our native speaker intuition about how the language is used in natural situations.

Elsewhere, Krashen (1985) theorises that an *affective filter* can prevent the acquisition of language despite the presence of suitable input. The affective filter can be overcome by the use of motivating, meaningful, personally relevant materials. These are precisely the kind of materials we prepare, based on our knowledge of our Ls' needs, desires, and interests.

We use our tailor-made texts and activities with classes of different sizes and with varied age groups as well. Sometimes our classes are small private lessons, with only one or two middle-aged Ls; at other times they are university freshmen classes, and still others are composed of 10 or 15 senior citizens at a culture center. With the private lessons, the consultations with the Ls are less time-consuming and it is easier to reach agreement on the content, while with the larger classes, as there are more opinions and varied requests from the Ls, it is up to the teacher to make the final decision about the next activity's content.

### Preparation

The first step in preparing the activities is to discuss with our Ls the reasons or situations for which they would like to use English. Their replies usually include talking about topical items in the news, basic communicative situations such as shopping or asking the way, and topics relating to upcoming travel to foreign countries or other encounters with English-speakers.

Based on their suggestions and requests (or, sometimes, our knowledge of their interests), we prepare brief dialogs of six or seven conversational turns between two people. The dialogs are scripted as natural conversational sequences between two friends or acquaintances. To personalize them further, we often use names of our Ls as names for the interactants.

The Appendix shows two dialogs we have recently written for our Ls. The first, "The Wedding," is based on a current affairs topic we know to be of interest to many of

our Ls. The second, “Conference in Hawaii.” was written in response to a specific request from a L about to attend a conference overseas.

Each activity now takes an average of twenty to thirty minutes to prepare. When we first started, it might have taken ten to fifteen minutes more.

Once made, the dialogs can be used in any number of ways familiar to teachers. What follows is a description of a way of using tailor-made dialogs that we have found to be particularly effective with our Ls.

### Quick Guide

**Learner Maturity Level:** Any level

**Preparation Time:** About an hour, but less with experience

**Activity Time:** Anywhere from 20 to 40 minutes

**Materials:** One A4 piece of paper per learner

### Preparation for the activity

We use one A4 sheet of paper for each activity. We put the topic of the activity at the top of the page and the first speaker’s dialog follows immediately below. The second speaker’s dialog is on the bottom half of the page, so the Ls simply have to fold the paper in half so they can see their half of the dialog, but not the other half which their partner has.

### Procedure

**Step 1:** Explain the background to the activity to the Ls. We say that it is a conversational game with a dialog that we

have made just for them. We tell them the topic and say a few words about it. This activates relevant schemata.

**Step 2:** Explain the activity. We show the Ls the two parts of the dialog from the front of the room, explaining that there are two speakers. We go on to say that Speaker A’s part of the dialog is already in the correct order, but that Speaker B’s part is mixed up and that Speaker B must listen carefully to what Speaker A says in order to make the correct response. We add that Speaker A must listen carefully to B’s response and tell her if what she has said is correct.

**Step 3:** Hand the activity out to Ls. Instruct Ls to fold the paper in half and only look at Speaker B’s part.

**Step 4:** Give Ls a few minutes to study the dialog and comprehend the meaning. The Ls are encouraged to look up any unfamiliar words in their dictionaries and discuss with their classmates any grammatical structures that they are having trouble with. This usually requires five to ten minutes of class time depending on the level of the Ls and their familiarity with the activity.

**Step 5:** When the Ls say they are ready to begin, the teacher calls out a L’s name and says clearly and at normal speed the first part of Student A’s dialog. The L answers with the response that she thinks is a fit for what has been said. If she has chosen the correct response the teacher continues the activity by calling on the next L. If she does not give the correct response the teacher compliments her on her effort and tells her that there is a more appropriate response. She can either try again or let the teacher know that she wants him to ask somebody else.

**Note:** The whole time the activity takes place the teacher tries to keep up the *game* atmosphere. An activity of six or

seven turns for each speaker may take the Ls ten or fifteen minutes to work out orally with the teacher.

**Step 6:** The Ls are then asked to practice the activity in pairs, keeping their papers folded and one L taking the part of A and the other B. They are asked to look only at their own half of the paper. However, while the teacher may think this is a good idea the Ls will often take a quick look at their partner's part of the dialog when the going gets tough. It is for this reason that the Ls together do Speaker B's part and the teacher Student A's part before the Ls are put into pairs and asked to play the game together.

**Step 7:** After the activity is over we ask our Ls to evaluate the activity they have just finished, by following these steps:

(a) We write on the board, "Please tell us your opinion of the activity."

(b) We draw an evaluation line on the board. The evaluation line is written in the following manner.

1	2	3	4	5	6	
Very good for			Not good at all			
improving my English						

(c) We ask each L to tell us a number. We keep track of the Ls' ratings by putting a mark under the appropriate number as it is stated. In this way, Ls and teacher can see how effective or ineffective the Ls considered the activity to be. The Ls seem to enjoy both this evaluation of the activity and seeing how their classmates evaluate it as well.

### Variation

In many cases the activity can be taken one step further.

The topic of the first activity in the appendix is Princess Norinomiya's wedding. In the middle of the activity the dialog becomes personalized in that the Ls are asking each other about their future weddings. The teacher can use these parts of the dialog for conversing with some or all of the Ls about their thoughts on marriage. With a few alterations in the dialog, the activity and the follow-up conversation with the Ls can both be used with a class of mixed sexes or only males. Something similar can be done with the second activity in the appendix—it can be used as a starting point for Ls to talk about future plans or past experiences.

### Conclusion

When we asked 63 of our first year women Ls in an Oral English class at a private women's university to evaluate the activity using the evaluation line above, 30 of them responded *one* (very good), 20 responded *two*, twelve *three*, and one *five*. When we asked the L, a very good English speaker, the reason she responded *five*, she said that the sentence structure and the vocabulary used were too easy and not challenging enough. She suggested using more difficult materials in the future. She seems to be an exception, but we noticed that when the activity was being done in class she was very active and continued doing the pair work part right up to the end.

We also asked our Ls the following question, *Do you want to do this type of activity again?* 91% responded in the affirmative. We therefore think that this activity is sufficiently effective in our Ls' minds for improving their English and also stimulating and fun enough to be used from time to time. We have used this activity for warming-up at

the beginning of a class period and also at the end of class as a way to wind down from the preceding task.

As mentioned above there is some preparation time involved in making tailor-made dialogs and consultation with the Ls is of paramount importance. We feel that the preparation time is not too much of an inconvenience as we are rewarded with high interest on the part of our Ls. The time spent consulting with the Ls allows us to know more about them and gives them a chance to see that we care and have their interests in mind when we prepare our classes.

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### References

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## Appendix 1

### *The wedding*

- a.
- a. Well, Princess Norinomiya got married this week, didn't she?
- b.
- a. I did too. The bride and bridegroom looked really happy.
- b.
- a. I don't know about that, but both of them looked very happy and content.
- b.
- a. I want to have a traditional Shinto marriage. I want to be married in a shrine with a Shinto priest presiding.
- b.
- a. That's right, we will. What kind of marriage ceremony do you want to have? Do you want it to be in a church?
- b.
- a. That sounds lovely. Anyway I hope the new couple is happy together. The princess is now a commoner like us.
- b.
- b.

1. I guess you will wear kimonos then, both you and your husband.
2. Didn't they? I think a woman looks most beautiful on her wedding day, don't you?
3. Right, she is just like we are now, an ordinary person. I hope they're happy too.
4. My dream is to have the ceremony in a small chapel in Hawaii. There will be an American minister and a lot of our relatives and friends will come from Japan to attend.
5. Wasn't the wedding wonderful? I watched part of the ceremony on TV.
6. Do you think about your wedding day? What do you want it to be like?

**Appendix 2:**

***Conversation for the Conference in Hawaii***

- a.
- a. Hi, how are you? I'm Kathy Smith. Do you remember me?
- b.
- a. Oh, they're grown up now. The oldest one has a son and a daughter, so I'm a grandmother now.
- b.
- a. How nice! When did you arrive? How was your flight?

- b.
- a. How long are you going to be here?
- b.
- a. Well, we must do some sightseeing together. You've been here before, right?
- b.
- a. We could go to Diamond Head on a tour or play some golf if you like or even go snorkeling.
- b.
- b.
1. Of course I remember you. How have you been? How are your children?
2. I love snorkeling. Let's do some and let's spend an afternoon shopping at Alamona.
3. It was OK. We got in at 6 a.m., so I'm still a bit jet lagged.
4. We were here about 10 years ago. I'm so glad to be back.
5. We plan to be here for 3 nights. I have to be back at work by Wednesday.
6. Time flies, doesn't it? Our daughter is now entering her dental internship.