

# Engaging students with textbook dialogues

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The purpose of this paper is to share various techniques for making textbook dialogues and stories more meaningful for students. These techniques have been divided into two categories: (1) prereading and (2) reading and speaking activities. The prereading activities make use of student schema activation to bring dialogues to life and capture student interest. Both categories of activities are influenced by the teaching approach Desuggestopedia. One principle from this approach is the creation of a new world and characters for students to live in, thereby, enabling students with negative learning experiences to forget their own limiting beliefs about language study and learn with more ease and joy. The author's intention is to describe simply and clearly the techniques and principles he has successfully applied in his lessons. Hopefully, other teachers will find them of equal benefit considering their context and teaching style.

今回のこの論文の目的はテキストの会話文やストーリーを学習者にとって意味のあるものにするための様々な指導技術を共有することである。これらの技術は以下のような二つに部類される。(1)プレレーディング (2)リーディングとスピーキング活動。プレレーディング活動は学習者が持っている概念を利用し実生活の会話に結びつけて、学習者の興味を引きつけさせる。両者のアクティビティともデスジェストベディア教授法の影響を受けている。この教授法の一つの原理はまさに新しい学習理念を創造することである。このことにより学習者は学習言語において間違いを恐れなくなる。

著者の意図は実際の授業で成功した技術技法を紹介することである。他の先生方もこれらの技術が各自の授業、指導法に参考になることを望む。

**T**he aim of this paper is to describe various techniques for making textbook dialogues more meaningful and engaging for students. Even if the dialogue seems dull and disconnected from their lives these teaching methods can capture the students' interest and imagination. In this way, classes become not only more enjoyable but also more focused for both the students and the teacher. For those interested in gaining a deeper understanding of these classroom practices also included is some relevant language teaching theory.

When teaching any dialogue one practice is to separate dialogue learning activities into two categories. The two categories are:

- A. Prereading activities and
- B. Reading and speaking activities.

Prereading activities are the collection of techniques used by a teacher before the students read the dialogue. The intention with these activities is to prepare the students as much as possible for the dialogue. The more students are prepared, the more they will understand.

The importance of prereading activities should not be underestimated. When we talk about a topic it is usually the case that we have some background information. How much information we have often dictates how deeply we can explore the topic. As a foreign student I was travelling in the United States several summers ago. I turned on the car radio and began listening to a baseball game. The commentator's voice was smooth and calm until suddenly a player hit "a homerun". Hailing from Liverpool, England where the predominant religions are Christianity and football I had no idea what had happened but it sounded exciting. What was this thing "a homerun"? Shortly after, another batter executed "a bunt". My traveling companion explained these terms and I came to the conclusion that a home run is the closest thing to scoring a goal in football and a bunt can be likened to chipping a football in terms of body dynamics. My friend continued, by explaining that the two teams playing were the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox. The history of these encounters weighs in favor of the wealthier Yankees but the Red Sox fans relentlessly support

their team whether winning or losing. Ah, I thought so it's similar to a football game between my Liverpool and the more commercial Manchester United. Naturally I felt myself supporting the Red Sox. "Come on you Red Sox. Come on my boys!"

Starting with no knowledge nor interest in baseball I had come to understand some characteristics of the game by connecting them to my own life and interests and had even found a team to support.

This analogy serves as an explanation of how to teach dialogues. First, offer a context, next introduce new vocabulary, followed by connecting the dialogue and vocabulary to the students' lives. Finally allow the students' imagination to ignite.

Here are the techniques I successfully use in my classroom:

### *Prereading activities.*

#### 1. Set the scene

Before class write the title of the dialogue on the board. Write the names of the characters on the board too. Use different color chalk and write the names in different sizes. Also make a list of any new vocabulary. When students enter the class they will read the words. Some will read them out loud. Already they are wondering what the names mean, how you will teach this class and how they will interact with the language on the board. They are curious. Their imagination has been stimulated. Explain to the students that they are going to hear a conversation between two people. Students should keep their textbooks closed for the time being. Read

the names from the board, and offer a few details about the two characters e.g. “One of the characters is called Ken. Ken is a big boy from London. He loves basketball and tennis. Ken has long, black hair.” Use props to develop the characters such as a wig or a big, false nose.

Provide a relevant, meaningful context. If the dialogue is between two high school students you could say “This conversation takes place in our school outside the teacher’s room.”

## 2. Endless questions

Now connect the new vocabulary to the world of the students. If the dialogue describes a P.E teacher who is wearing a tie and the new words are P.E and tie, point to a student’s shirt asking. Is this a tie? Accept the response and move to another student pointing at his tie asking again. Is this a tie? Although the word tie might not have been explicitly taught in your class it is probable that at least one of your students knows the word or can guess it. For the next word on the list P.E you could ask. Do you often practice P.E? Do you like P.E? or even Who is your P.E teacher?

After asking such yes/no questions see if the students can guess the meaning of the word. This is quite different to jumping straight in and asking. What does P.E mean? What does necktie mean? These yes/no questions make the language real and oral. As students pay attention the class is energized.

Two key principles behind this teaching strategy are:

- A. Grant the students what they already know. Why teach something when some students may already know the answer? Let them help you.

- B. Connect the dialogue to the student’s lives. Imbue each new word with personal meaning for the students.

## 3. Erasure technique

A fun and challenging technique for students to memorize new vocabulary is called erasure technique. The list of new vocabulary you have written on the board becomes the focus of attention. Point to each word on the list and let the students, in chorus, repeat your pronunciation. Now erase one of the words and go through the list again. Point to the spot where the erased word was and let the students remember and say the word by themselves. In this way a student has to recall a word from its position in the list. All my classes love this activity. Students are hungry to shout out a word they remember. Practice pronunciation of the vocabulary list in this way until all the words on the board have been erased.

## 4. Dramatic reading

The final prereading activity is a dramatic reading and acting out of the dialogue by the teacher. Before you read the text check that the students still have their textbook closed. Students should focus on the teacher at this time, listening and absorbing the visual information.

Whilst reading the dialogue remember to:

- A. Look up at the students. Eye contact is important.
- B. Stand by the character’s name (written on the board) when speaking his/her lines.

- C. Change your voice for each character. Experiment with speed, rhythm, intonation and depth of voice.
- D. Wear a prop for each character.
- E. Add suitable gestures according to the text e.g. If a character says “I don’t know” at that time scratch your head and look puzzled.

Hidden within these prereading activities is a rhythm of activating and relaxing the students:

- \* Set the scene = students are passive
- \* Endless questions = students are active
- \* Erasure technique = students are active
- \* Dramatic reading = students are passive

The aim of such a rhythm is to stimulate the students both consciously and sub consciously to the language. Most researchers agree that we use between 5 to 10 percent of our brain capacity. Georgi Lozanov, a doctor of medical science and the founder of the teaching approach, Desuggestopedia, believes that using such passive/active rhythms to stimulate the learners’ minds helps them to absorb the language at a deeper level. As Dr. Lozanov explains in his interview with Iki, S. (1993) we all have mental reserves, which are rarely used, yet can be tapped into when we enter a state of “concentrative psycho relaxation” (Lozanov 1978). A primary aim of Desuggestopedia is to move students towards this mental state as Lozanov considers concentrative psycho relaxation to be the optimal state of brain activity for learning. This state of relaxation means that the students’ bodies are relaxed whilst their minds are focused and alert

to the materials being studied. By varying the energy in the class the desuggestopedic teacher acts as a catalyst to help students enter a state of concentrative psychorelaxation.

By the end of these prereading activities a skillful teacher has already wrapped the students up in the world of the dialogue without even opening the textbook. This is achieved by introducing the characters and bringing them to life, whilst carefully organizing the activities so that there is a balance of student dynamism and passivization throughout these techniques.

### *Reading and speaking activities*

#### 5. Read and repeat

Now ask the students to open their textbooks. A traditional read and repeat session fits in nicely here. The teacher reads each line and the students repeat in chorus.

#### 6. Shadowing

Follow on with shadowing. This means reading the dialogue aloud again. Except this time when the teacher reads, the students read along at the same time. The teacher reads in a LOUD voice and the students read in a quiet voice. Everyone speaks at the same time with the same speed and rhythm. The bonus of shadowing is that it deepens students’ awareness of spoken English. Students can hear their own voice and the teacher’s voice melting together. This can have a profound effect on increasing motivation and confidence in oral English because students are speaking at a natural speed and rhythm. Shadowing also helps students to polish up their pronunciation. It is so often the case that when students

just repeat their teacher they do so in a slow, heavy, robotic voice. This is far from natural, spontaneous oral output. Shadowing brings the students closer to this desired goal because they are pushed to “keep up” with the teacher as she/he reads the dialogue.

#### 7. Pair practice

Having understood the background and new vocabulary, repeated and shadowed the dialogue your students are now well prepared to practice it in pairs. Ask students to play both roles at least one time.

#### 8. Read, look up, speak

One helpful step to memorization of the script is to ask each student to choose a character. The student reads her/his character's sentence silently and then looks up and says the sentence. A student takes one sentence at a time, reads it in silence, looks up and says it. If the sentence is too long, simply take a manageable part of it to memorize and say. Then read the next part of the sentence, look up and say it.

#### 9. Students' performance

The grand finale of this lesson lies in two students coming to the front of the class and acting out the dialogue, as much as possible without having to look at the textbook. This provides individual accountability for each student. Students' performance will demonstrate the effort each student has put in to learning and understanding the text. Not all students have to perform during the same lesson as that might take a lot of time. However, note down those who do perform

and make sure by the end of the term that all students have acted out at least one dialogue. After each performance you may want to offer some feedback. I usually give two positive points and one point to improve on. A typical piece of feedback might sound like this. “Hiroshi, you have nice, natural speed, clear pronunciation and remember to speak in a loud voice”

Note that students are invited to use props the teacher wore during the dramatic reading. The use of props is a technique of Desuggestopedia's to positively influence the psychological set up of the students. From birth each of us has developed patterned responses to daily situations, such as how we feel on entering our workplace or how we respond to praise or pressure. On opening a textbook some students may think “Textbooks are boring” or “Grammar is hard”. Some of these inner, unconscious patterns such as the ones described here can be extremely limiting. Dr. Lozanov found that the learning process can be accelerated when self limiting beliefs, such as, “Textbooks are boring” or “Grammar is hard” are forgotten and instead replaced by “Study can be fun” and “Grammar is interesting”. Props are important because they bring students' imagination into reality. They are playful and reduce the stress of performing in front of others. By wearing props in role plays students can create a new character for themselves. Each student has an opportunity to forget his everyday personality by becoming a character in the dialogue. In this new role students forget themselves and can dispel the fear of making mistakes or their dislike for studying that might otherwise stunt their language learning development.

## Conclusion

This paper has been written from the context of secondary education. Some Japanese teachers at junior and senior high school admitted these techniques and principles sound very interesting but did not feel comfortable using them, especially the act of wearing props. Several teachers said they felt it would be improper and they would feel foolish in front of their students. These teachers often use, what can be termed, “traditional” methods of teaching such as rote memorization of vocabulary and dialogues. With so many language teaching techniques and theories available today it may surprise teachers outside of secondary education to know just how common rote memorization is in secondary schools. Based on conversations with Japanese teachers of English and my own visits to other teacher’s classes it is very common indeed, even at high level establishments. As Leiguarda, A.M. (2003) explains, one problem with rote memorization is that in order to retain information the data must be processed several times for long term storage to occur. A lack of context also makes information very hard to remember. If we want to help our students to remember important information we need to provide a meaningful context, which activates the students’ emotions (preferably positive emotions). In my case I applied my love of football to gain a basic understanding of baseball and connected new, textbook vocabulary to my students’ everyday lives. Emotional memory is the most powerful type of memory. Emotions activate chemicals that stimulate the brain (McGaugh et. al., 1990) and when the brain is stimulated recall is easier.

Of course it’s important to remember that not all teachers are comfortable wearing props. These techniques should be used flexibly. If a teacher doesn’t want to use a wig that is fine, although, he might want to try altering his voice according to the character he plays in the dialogue. Please use these techniques according to your own beliefs and context. Then, if you feel comfortable develop from there to explore more ways of teaching dialogues. Of course you can also employ your own tried and tested activities into the mix. Good luck and enjoy engaging your students with dialogues.

**Ben Backwell** is a football playing English teacher in Nagoya. His work interests are identity in the classroom and cooperative learning.

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