

One size fits all: Two activities that transcend level and age

Chris Wharton

CES English School

Finding a successful classroom activity is a blessing for most ESL/EFL teachers; finding one that works across proficiency levels and age groups is a godsend. This paper details two such activities. The first activity uses a simple word game as a gateway to a much deeper process involving vocabulary development, spelling, sentence formation, paragraph cohesion, and creative story telling. The second activity makes use of the students' first language (L1) and encourages translation from the second language (L2) to the L1, and back again. Although the use of the L1 in the classroom is a contentious issue, it is felt that back translation raises students' awareness of the possibility of expressing the same meaning in various ways. Both activities were used successfully with very different groups of students: elementary school students, college students, and advanced EFL adult students. English teachers who can find activities like these will find their planning to be more efficient and their classes to be more effective.

効果的なアクティビティを見つけることは、多くのESL/EFL教師にとって重要である。特に習熟度の異なる学習者にも年齢の異なる学習者にも効果的なアクティビティは、大変貴重である。本論では、そのようなアクティビティを2つ紹介する。第1のアクティビティは、簡単な単語ゲームを導入として用いた後、それを語彙の増強、スペリング、文構成、段落の結束性、そして話の創作などを含むさらに高度な過程へと発展させていくものである。第2のアクティビティは生徒の母語を用いるもので、まず第2言語(L2)を母語に訳させ、その後再びL2に訳させるものである。母語のクラス内での使用は異論もあるが、再翻訳により、生徒は同じ意味を様々な方法で表現できることに気がつく。両方のアクティビティが、小学生のグループ、大学生のグループ、そして上級のEFL成人クラスのグループなど、非常に異なる様々な集団で有効であった。このようなアクティビティは、授業計画の効率化と授業の有効性を高めるものと思われる。

As owner and head teacher of a private English school in Japan, I have the good fortune of teaching students of all ages in the course of a “normal” day. Some days can be a little more hectic than others, especially if the first class of the day is a college class comprised of twenty bubbly girls, followed by a fun forty-something housewife, then a group of four energetic 4-year-olds, a quiet junior high school girl, five rambunctious elementary school boys, followed by three mixed adult classes, and topping the day off with two silly high school girls.

Aside from a cup of coffee and a quick rice ball, what gets me through this kind of day is efficiency through repetition of classroom activities. Of course, the aforementioned classes are extremely diverse and at first appear to offer no opportunities to utilize the same kinds of activities. However, it is surprising that what often works with elementary students can be modified to work with college students, and even advanced adult learners.

This paper details two classroom activities that were successful with groups of very different learners in Japan. The first is called “Word Chain Stories” and allows students to express their creativity while focusing on spelling, vocabulary, sentence formation, and paragraph cohesion. The second activity is called “Back Translation” and is only suitable for monolingual classes. Although some teachers may have qualms about letting, or in this case encouraging, students to use their first language (L1) in class, they will be surprised at the effectiveness of this activity.

Word Chain Stories

Elementary School Students

Not too long ago, I attempted an activity with a small group of Japanese elementary school students. It was nothing new to them as it was simply an adaptation of a famous children's game in Japan called *shiritori*. *Shiritori* translated into English means "taking the bottom" and involves players taking the bottom character of a word (Japanese is traditionally written from top to bottom in vertical columns on the page) and saying a word that begins with that character. The game continues until a player ends a word with the character "n", as no Japanese words begin with "n".

The English version also exists in different forms and under different names like "Word chain" (Hill, 2005, p. 138) or "Grab on behind" (Wise & Forrest, 2003, p. 74). The idea of the English *shiritori* is generally the same with variations including time limits, category restrictions, or parts of speech restrictions. These activities are fun and a great way to warm up or creatively brainstorm new vocabulary. However, there is so much more that can be done with this simple activity.

After setting an arbitrary five-minute time limit, the two elementary school students and I wrote down the following 22 words:

cat- tiger- red- duck- key- you- up- panda- are- elephant- top- pig- green- no- on- nut- tall- lion- new- wonderful- leaf- fish

After taking a quick glance at the collection of words, I thought it might be fun to put them together into some kind of short story with the students. When I told the two grade 5 students what I was planning, they stared at me with tilted heads and looks that said, "We can't do this." So, I started them off with a generic opener, "One day a cat ...". I wrote this on the white board so we could work together. The students soon chimed in and the creative process began. I offered a few suggestions when they were stuck, but for the most part they filled in the gaps nicely, and we ended up with a finished product that incorporated all 22 words. The story was as follows:

One day a cat and a tiger met a red duck. They wanted a new key. A green pig said, "Are you stupid?"

"No!" said the cat and tiger. The green pig is on the tall panda.

A lion has a new key. He said, "I will trade you this wonderful key for a nut."

An elephant-nose fish jumped up from the Nile River and said, "You are all stupid. There's a new key on top of that leaf!"

The story was so bizarre that the students were laughing the whole time and seemed to really enjoy directing the actions of the characters, not to mention using the word "stupid" twice.

The activity could have ended there; however, the story was crying out for more attention, so I assigned some homework. Students were instructed to create a comic strip that represented the story we had just created. The students were thrilled to give life to their story. Likewise, I was happy to see them so excited to do homework.

The following week, I had actually forgotten about the previous week's homework assignment, only to be reminded by the students eagerly waiting to show off their creations. The two comic strips can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

College Students

The activity had been so successful with the kids that I thought it could be extended to older students. A few days later, I tried the initial word chain activity with a group of 20 college students, all girls. The students had been working hard the previous eight weeks on preparing and giving short speeches on various topics in class. This class happened to have only five speeches scheduled, so the activity was actually used to give the students a rest and a change of pace.

I wrote the words on the board as students called them out. Interestingly, the difficulty level of the words was not so different from that of the elementary students. We stopped after three minutes with 17 words and began to invent a story. It was equally crazy, yet a little more sophisticated than the elementary students' masterpiece.

The next step this time around was not to produce a comic strip, but to get in groups of four and play the word chain game again until they had between 15 and 20 words. Students were



Figure 1. An elementary school student's (boy) comic strip



Figure 2. An elementary school student's (girl) comic strip

then given some time to produce a story using all of the words. One of the stories is reproduced below, starting with the group's brainstormed words.

dog- god- door- rock- kick- kill- life- enjoy- yet- talk- know- world- dangerous- speed- do- open- neck

One day, I opened the door and I saw a dog enjoying rock music. The dog talked to me: "The world is becoming dangerous, so my life changes speedily."

I asked the dog, "Why?"

The dog answered, "God is kicking people's necks and killing people! Do you know this happens?"

The story is not finished yet ...

With the college students I did not offer any creative advice, just answered questions related to grammar and spelling. This time there was no homework assigned.

Intermediate Adult Students

The next day, I had a class of five middle-aged adult students who were looking tired due to the hot summer weather, so we started off with the fun word chain activity. We continued until the whiteboard could not hold any more words and then took turns reading through the list as fast as we could. It was fun and the students seemed to be more relaxed.

However, the class was surprised when I told them they had ten minutes to write a story incorporating as many of the words as they

could. We seldom do writing exercises in class, so it was a good opportunity for some practice. Students worked individually for ten minutes and then read their stories to the class. It was a great way to start the class and students seemed to have fun with it. The exercise actually led to an interesting conversation about imagination and how people often think the same way.

The word chain stories were successful across different class sizes, age groups, and proficiency levels. They can be further adapted to suit any ESL/EFL venue and can be utilized for warm-ups, creative writing exercises, or just for a fun break from the usual. The other activity that worked equally well across these same distinctive groups was "back translation", described in the following section.

Back Translation

Translation is no stranger to English language teaching (ELT) yet there are many opponents of its use in the ESL/EFL classroom (Chaudron, 1988; Ellis, 1984; Krashen, 1981). Before delving into a description of the back translation activity, it is important to address the main concerns some might have with encouraging the use of the students' L1 in the English classroom. Weschler (1997) contends that the arguments against using translation can be divided into four areas: 1) the L1 interferes with thinking in English; 2) the L1 acts as a crutch for the learner; 3) the L1 extends the use of an interlanguage and leads to fossilization; 4) L1 use wastes class time that should be focused on L2 use.

Weschler (1997) responds by positively reframing each concern. For example, he views the L1 as a tool that helps rather than interferes with L2 acquisition. He substitutes the crutch metaphor with scaffolding, which can be removed as the learner improves. He sees interlanguage as a natural part of L2 development. Finally, he questions how valuable English-only class time is for those learners who struggle to produce comprehensible English output. Nation (2003) perhaps sums it up best by suggesting, "a balanced approach is needed which sees a role for the L1 but also recognises the importance of maximising L2 use in the classroom" (p. 7).

Edge (1986) sees English language teaching and translation as being connected, saying "there

is no obvious reason why an ability to translate should not be seen as a type of communicative competence" (p. 121). Campbell (2002) refers to this as "natural translation" and rightfully claims, "a regular part of the communicative repertoire is to explain something in another language" (p. 59).

The idea with back translation is to have students translate an English passage into their L1. They then switch papers with a classmate who has translated a different passage. The next step has the students translating *back* to English. This technique allows for both pair and group work, contrastive discussions involving accuracy and appropriateness, and uses translation as a topic for further discussions in English. Edge (1986) contends that the "procedure creates a communicative context for more formal follow-up work" (p. 124).

As opposed to the word chain stories, I started with one of my advanced adult classes using Eadie's (1999) lesson plan, an adaptation of Edge's (1986) earlier work, as it was for a monolingual EFL class using back translation with a teacher who does not speak the students' L1. After a short warm up to introduce the topic, avoiding explicit pre-teaching of relevant vocabulary, the translation task was explained. Students were then given either Text A or Text B to translate from English into their L1. The source texts should be authentic and short, yet challenging enough to engage the students. Eadie's (1999) example texts were used for comparison and read as follows:

Text A

There are many ways of sending secret messages. An interesting method was used by a Chinese general, called Pingyo, 2000 years ago. Pingyo's army was far from their homeland. Between the soldiers and home there were many enemies. But Pingyo sent letters to his king and the enemy could not read them. He sent them like this:

Text B

A strong messenger was chosen from the soldiers. His hair was cut off and a letter was written on his bald head. Then he was dressed

as a poor farmer and sent home. His journey lasted many weeks. During this time his hair grew and covered the message. The enemy stopped him many times. He was searched but the letter was not found. When he reached the king's palace his hair was cut off again and the letter was read to the king.

The main goal is to raise awareness to the possibility of saying the same thing correctly in many different ways (Eadie, 1999). This can be facilitated by using the chart seen in Table 1.

Table 1. Comparison chart from Eadie (1999)

Original Version	Acceptable	Not too bad	Unacceptable
... he was dressed as he wore he wear the clothes of he weared him a dress ...

Back translation technique in use

Before I attempted this with one of my classes, I felt, as Eadie (1999) had predicted some teachers would feel, "reluctant to use L1 for fear of escalating the use of L1 and ... reducing exposure to English." Students were also a little apprehensive, as they do not usually use any Japanese in the classroom.

During the hour-long lesson, students spent about a third of the time translating and the other two thirds discussing, in English, what was acceptable and why. Some interesting discussions can be seen in Examples 1–3.

Example 1. Using context to derive meaning

S1: What about a missing word?

T: Look at the context, the words before and after.

S1: The original was "On his bald head" ...

S2: I didn't translate exactly.

T: That's OK.

S2: Because before the word, his hair was cut off and the letter was written ... so he is obviously bald."

S1: Yes, obviously. So it's acceptable.

A short discussion regarding the use of context to derive meaning followed.

Example 2. Active vs. Passive Voice

S1: How about the structure ... sentence structure?

T: OK, good.

S1: Passive and ... what is the opposite of passive?

T: Active.

S1: Active, yes.

T: So you switched? Can you give me the example?

S1: "His hair was cut off again and the letter was read to the king". That's the original one... and I wrote "the king was able to read the message after shaving his hair."

T: What do you think?

S1: I think the meaning is the same. And "cut off" and "shave" are the same.

S3: Acceptable.

T: Yes, I'd say it is perfectly acceptable.

A short discussion on the uses of the active and passive voices followed.

Example 3. Lexical Choice

S2: I have "method". The original one is "method" and I wrote "way".

T: Ok, "method" and "way". What do you think?

S2: ... to send a message.

T: Method to send a message?

S1: Same.

S3: ... interesting method. Same.

S1: Same!

S2: Really?

S1: Almost the same.

T: ... interesting method ...

S3: Like a formal or technical ... "method".

T: It sounds more formal ...

S1: Almost the same.

S3: Yeah, "way" is a little, how to say, conversational.

S1: Acceptable.

T: Yeah, I think so.

A short discussion followed about the acceptability of alternative lexical choices in English.

I was pleasantly surprised at the conclusion of the lesson. Students seemed to genuinely enjoy themselves and the task stimulated some lively discussions. When the activity was attempted with the college students and younger children, level appropriate texts were obviously selected and they too not only discovered *how* to state meanings differently but also *why* some things were stated differently. Above all, the lessons focused on the importance of *meaning* over *perfection* and demonstrated to students that they can use a variety of means to express themselves.

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Chris Wharton ran a private English school in Japan up until 2010. For nearly a decade he taught English in kindergartens, elementary schools, junior high schools, high schools, colleges, and private English schools. He now teaches EAP at a Canadian polytechnic. His current research interests are in the field of learner autonomy, the effects of personality in second language acquisition, and L2 vocabulary acquisition.



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Even a brief look at the biographies of the plenary speakers suggests that among them, they have worked in, taught in, lived in, or been to a large percentage of all the countries in the world.

As with past JALT conferences, JALT2012 features the parallel JALT Junior conference for teachers of younger learners. **Özge Karaoğlu**, a freelance teacher trainer and consultant based in Turkey, is the JJ plenary speaker this year. A specialist in teaching young and very young learners, she is also an expert in using technology in language teaching. A proponent of project-based learning, she has worked with children in helping them develop digital games and iPhone/iPad applications. Recently she was awarded the English Speaking Union Award for new writers and has become a very well-regarded blogger through her site, ÖzgeKaraoğlu.edublogs.org.



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