Real Life Problem Solving as Speaking Activity:  
A Collaborative Learning Method

Classroom activities which emphasize interaction aid students’ ability to use language. The give-and-take of message exchanges enables students to retrieve and interrelate a great deal of what they have encountered (Rivers 1987). Interaction allows students to practice being effective speakers of a language by developing the two needed sets of skills: managing an interaction (including such sub-skills as knowing when and how to take the floor, how to invite someone else to speak, and how to keep a conversation going), and negotiating meaning, that is, making sure the person you are speaking to has understood you correctly, and assuring that you have understood the other person (Bygate 1987). Real interaction involves not just expressing one’s own ideas, but comprehending those of others. Using such communicative tasks in the classroom are preferred because they are pieces of classroom work which involve the learners in comprehending, manipulating, producing or interacting in the target language while attention is principally focused on meaning rather than form (Nunan 1989). As a teacher of EFL, I have sought activities which put interaction, or communicative tasks, in the forefront.

Further, as a teacher committed to teaching adults because of the world knowledge they bring to the classroom, I think of myself as somewhat of an activist. Like Freire, (1970) I wish to reject the so-called banking concept of education whereby knowledge is a gift bestowed by those who are considered knowledgeable upon those whom they consider to know nothing, thus education becomes an act of depositing where the students are the depositories and the teacher is the depositor. I am interested in furthering the notion of interaction to embrace a collaborative pedagogy. Collaboration is considered to be an
underlying orientation to being social such that the participants share a general sense of purpose and orientation, and a discernible set of roles (Reagan, Fox and Bleich 1994). In other words, the classroom becomes a community of adults who bring vast experience in order to interact about things that really matter. Particularly, I wanted

[To] forge a connection between whatever we were talking about in class and what went on in the lives of the individual members. I wanted to get “out there” and “in here” together. (Tompkins 1990).

Such activism, whereby interaction really matters to the students, is an ideal complement to the affective factors affecting foreign language learning. Emotions, self-esteem, empathy, lowering anxiety, and raising attitude and motivation (Shumin 1997) are all fostered when the students are engaged in genuine interaction. The student environment re-enacts “real life communication” (Nunan 1989). In other words, what is said is potentially interesting or useful to the participants, and the result of the communication is of intrinsic interest or value to the participants. As in real-life communication, the participants talk in order to get information they want, reach a decision, or solve a problem. Not surprisingly, interactive activities require the teacher to step out of the limelight, to cede a full role to the student in developing and carrying through activities, to accept all kinds of opinions, and be tolerant of errors the student makes while attempting to communicate (Rivers 1987). A classroom activity which manifests the opportunity to integrate these high demands is a joy to implement. For this reason, I detail “Real-Life Problem Solving.”

**REAL-LIFE PROBLEM SOLVING**

The first time we explore Real-Life Problem Solving, I put the list of activity stages and time limits on the board. Then I divide the students into groups of 4 to 6. Five seems to be ideal, but I aim for a consistent number of group members. The activity is not explained to
the students in detail at the beginning because it is too overwhelming. Instead, as I literally ring a bell to end each stage, I explain what they are to do in the next one. I point out that this activity has strict time limits, with seven stages, totaling 27 minutes, and that I will use a bell (or something that can be heard above the myriad conversations going on at the moment) to signal the end of each stage. The stages are:

- State the problems; choose one 5 minutes
- Analyze the problem 5 minutes
- Brainstorm solutions 5 minutes
- Choose two solutions 2 minutes
- Think the solutions through 5 minutes
- Identify a report-back date 1 minute
- Follow up on the report-back date 4 minutes

**State the problems; Choose one.**

Each student in the group talks about a real problem he or she is having. It could concern school, home, work, whatever. It should be a recurring event rather than an isolated incident. My students have discussed problems as varied as having a neighbor who perpetually blocks her driveway; a woman who suspected her husband was having an affair; a woman who hated her mother-in-law smoking in the house; and a student who feared an entrance exam looming in his future. It should be a problem that concerns the student, not the student’s friend, and not a ‘societal’ problem unless it touches the student directly.

After each member of the group states a problem, the group chooses one to focus on. I have never directed the students as to how to decide; they just do.

**Analyze the problem.**
There are several approaches to analyzing the problem. One of the four outlined below is chosen. The group members ask the relevant questions and the person with the problem answers as honestly as possible. I have written these approaches on index card for the groups to use during the activity.

(1) Find the pattern behind the problem. Does it just happen with certain people? Does it happen to other people as well? Is it institutional?

(2) Analyze the motives and goal of the participants. What do/did you want? What do/did the other person(s) want? Were your desires in conflict? If so, why? What is the advantage to the other if he/she changes his/her behavior? What are the disadvantages?

(3) Get more information. How have you tried to solve the problem? How did the solutions work or not work?

(4) Use a metaphor. If this were a game, how would you score? What are the rules? What would you name the game? If this were a war, which countries would be involved? How would the winner be determined? If this were a movie, what part would you play? The other(s)? What would be the turning point in the plot? How would it end?

**Brainstorm solutions.**

The person with the problem is silent and takes notes. The group members brainstorm as many solutions, wild and innovative as possible. Not every idea has to be a new one; elaboration and variations are encouraged.

**Identify two solutions.**

The person with the problem reviews the notes s/he took during the brainstorming session and identifies two that s/he decides are worth exploring further. Generally, solutions which
foster prevention rather than punishment are preferred. The student tells the group which
are his/her two chosen solutions.

Think the solutions through.

With the help of the group, the student anticipates how the chosen solutions would actually
be implemented. What steps are necessary? What people are involved? What additional
help may be needed? It is helpful to have a group member, but not the student with the
problem, take notes during this stage. The two solutions are detailed.

Identify a report-back date.

The student with the problem sets a date, an actual date, when s/he will report back to the
group what happened. This final commitment to the group seems to make the difference
between a classroom activity, and a real life-altering event. At this point, I make a chart of
groups and their report-back dates and post it for future reference. I give the students an
opportunity to share the nature of the problem and chosen solutions if they wish. They are
not required to share this information with the whole class. Some choose to discuss it;
others don’t.

Follow up on the report-back date.

On the various report-back dates, four minutes of class time is given to that group when
they are exempted from the other class activities. I usually have them leave the room, sit
together in the hallway or break area and the student with the problem reports on what
occurred. If no action was taken, they discuss what the obstacles were, and then they
brainstorm new solutions, and think through two, in order to set a new report-back date.

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The joy of this activity is the student response. “Oh, this is real.” “I can really use this
information.” “I’ve really learned a lot from my classmates about how to solve my
situation.” Such feedback makes it worthwhile. A caution, however; there is resistance sometimes manifested at the first stage of State the problems. It has often taken more than five minutes, actually closer to 15, the first time a new group begins the activity. It has taken guidance to direct the students’ attention away from the general and onto the specific. For example, students ruminated on drug use in society today, but then were re-directed into thinking about the issue’s impact on their lives. This led to a student taking about how she dreaded the return of her uncle to the household after his having dropped out of another rehabilitation program. Invariable, when we move through the activity, the outcome is consistently positive.

Real Life Problem-solving as Speaking Activity can be integrated into various syllabus designs. For content-based instruction, learner’s lives become the focus; for a functional syllabus, practice in brainstorming, supporting, advising, clarifying, agreeing and disagreeing is inherent; for a structural syllabus, students use first and second conditionals, modals, past, present and future.

After the first implementation of the activity, the teacher becomes simply a time-keeper, allowing all interaction to occur among the group members.

Throughout the semester I try to be mindful of the three-fold criteria outlined earlier: that an activity uses real-life communication, that it bridge ‘out there’ and ‘in here,’ and that it be collaborative. I have found these criteria are more likely met if, each time we undertake the activity during the semester, the group members remain constant. Collaboration is fostered by the growing satisfaction of addressing issues which matter in their lives, and solving some actual problems. Clearly, not all problems are so readily solved. Not all solutions are within the purview of one individual. While no class of mine has yet undertaken collective action to redress pollution, wages disparities or child labor practices,
such an outcome is possible! When adults truly put their minds to identifying and addressing issues in their lives, the world changes.