
Book Review

Communicative Activities for EAP

Jenni Guse. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011
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Are some EFL subject areas intrinsically more “communicative” than others? Speaking classes may immediately lend themselves to communicative teaching practices, but it can be challenging to incorporate communicative activities into academic listening class, or report writing class. Thanks to Jenni Guse’s *Communicative Activities for EAP*, however, I have been able to do just that. Guse’s book delivers over 100 communicative activities that are designed for use in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) classrooms. In the six months since I purchased this book, I have used her activities with success in intermediate to advanced level academic listening, report writing, speech, debate and discussion classes.

EAP courses generally aim to prepare students for study at an English-medium university. Resource books in the EAP field abound, but most tend to limit themselves to a specific skill set (such as academic listening), and fall short in the area of communicative activities. Guse, on the other hand, targets multiple EAP skills and makes communicative learning the focal point of her book. She provides activities that promote active communication, learner autonomy and critical thinking, while providing learners with exposure to authentic language. Her tasks allow students to grapple with both academic content and skills (such

as note-taking, presentation skills, and academic writing) in a fun and accessible way, and can be tailored to suit different proficiency levels and learning needs.

Guse divides her book into six chapters: speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary development and grammar. She provides a brief overview at the start of each activity summarizing the nature of the task, language and skills it targets, minimum English ability of the learner, teacher preparation required, and the time the task will take in class. Following this overview is a clear step-by-step procedure for implementing the activity. Where applicable she also includes an example of possible student output through the task (mostly in the speaking and writing chapters), or an example of a suitable text to use within the activity (in the listening and reading chapters). Examples of possible student output are helpful in allowing the teacher to envisage the types of student responses to expect or encourage. Texts included in the listening and reading chapters are useful in illustrating how to implement the tasks and what types of texts are suitable.

Unfortunately, I found it difficult to imagine directly utilizing any of the texts with my students. Guse explains in her introduction that she has endeavored to provide model texts from a range of content areas, presumably to demonstrate the scope of her activities. The result is a rather eclectic collection of language samples without context, often requiring specific topic knowledge. Some examples include a lecture on Egyptian cultural objects, an e-commerce and development report, and an essay on modern architectural theory.

A further limitation of the model texts in the book lies in their presentation. Though they are all labeled as “photocopiable”, the texts appear in an assortment of oddly sized boxes and tables, regardless of page breaks and with no instructions or space to write. The CD-ROM provided with the book includes all of the texts in a more user-friendly format; however, as the texts are not editable and the CD-ROM contains no other resource material, it seems a rather superfluous addition to the book.

Although I chose not to use any of Guse’s text samples in my classes, I do not believe that they ultimately detract from the quality of the activities themselves. Guse herself points out in her introduction that the choice of text must in

the end be the decision of the teacher, and that the activities in her book have been designed specifically to allow the teacher to choose the content area and authentic texts which best meet the needs of each specific group of learners. I believe it is this flexibility that makes the activities so effective.

One of my most successful academic listening classes last semester was based on an adaptation of an activity in the listening chapter. I chose Guse's Listening Comprehension exercise, which has students locate speech transcripts of interest to them and work in pairs to devise comprehension questions for their classmates. I provided my students with a list of suggested websites where they could view speeches, and access and print transcripts. This list was based on Guse's, with the addition of TED, The Open University, and British Council Web sites. Students worked in pairs to design a listening comprehension task based on the text. Guse suggests students create three questions: one with a yes/no answer, one who/what/when/where statement with missing words at the end, and one why/how statement with missing words. I also asked students to come up with a pre-reading activity to introduce the topic and vocabulary.

Guse's idea of offering a grammatical pattern for the questions encouraged students to consider a variety of question types and content appropriate to each. Students practiced reading the script smoothly and then formed new pairs to administer their mini-tests. The students were on-task and engaged from start to finish despite the fact that this was an extra-curricular class with a challenging range of ability-levels and backgrounds. It was a pleasure to watch them enthusiastically discussing their chosen texts and formulating comprehension tasks. One student waited after class to tell me how much he had enjoyed being able to "be the teacher".

I enjoyed similar success with an activity from Guse's grammar chapter, in a university report writing class. The Sentence Auction activity (which Guse explains is adapted from a game in Mario Rinvoluceri's 1984 resource book, *Grammar Games*) has the teacher collect incorrect sentences from student writing and compile these randomly on the board, together with accurate example sentences. (Guse does not specify, but I chose to use student work here too). Student groups are awarded a budget (e.g., \$1000), which they use to bid for

sentences that they believe to be correct. The amount they are willing to disburse for a sentence will depend on their confidence in its accuracy. The teacher takes the role of auctioneer, and continues the auction until all the sentences have been sold. The class then examines the sentences to identify which are incorrect and why. The group with the highest number of accurate sentences wins.

I used this activity to provide feedback on a student composition assignment. The activity allowed students to develop their self-correction and editing skills, while reviewing problematic grammar and vocabulary. The auction nature of the task was effective in encouraging students to identify how well they understood the grammatical issues at work as they decided how much “money” a sentence was worth. Student groups engaged in lively debate throughout the auction, and this activity allowed me to transform a potentially teacher-centered feedback class into an active student-centered learning environment.

Guse achieves her aims of promoting active communication, learner autonomy and critical thinking while exposing learners to authentic language, in a number of ways. Her activities focus on genuine communication in English both through tasks such as discussion and project work, and in the way in which students work at them in pairs or groups. Her tasks require students to think critically and analyze language, while learner autonomy is encouraged by allowing students to make choices related to content and task-management, as well as through peer tutoring and cooperation. Text authenticity is largely dependent on the teacher, but Guse provides ample online sources where the teacher or student can locate genuine oral or written language samples.

Guse’s tasks have recognizable utility value, and I have found that students enjoy the opportunity to put their learning to practical use in creative, challenging tasks that closely resemble those in which they hope to ultimately employ skills learned in class. *Communicative Activities for EAP* is a valuable addition to the pool of ELT resource books. It provides activity ideas that can be adapted for use not only in the EAP context, but across a range of learning situations. I recommend this book to any university-level educator seeking to promote communicative learning and student autonomy in the classroom. I look forward to incorporating more of Guse’s ideas into my classes in the future.

Reference

Rinvoluceri, M. (1984). *Grammar games*. Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.

Author's bio

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