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JAPAN

Teaching Conversation with Trivia

MOST READERS ARE PROBABLY FAMILIAR WITH THE TELEVISION GAME SHOW *Who wants to be a millionaire?* This program, which first aired in the United Kingdom in 1998, is now shown in 71 different countries and has 45 different versions in a variety of languages. The phenomenal spread of this show around the world in just a few years is a testament to the popularity of trivia across national and cultural boundaries. While the show does have its detractors, its popularity cannot be denied, and for this reason I believe it is not an overstatement to suggest that the desire to show off one's knowledge of trivia is universal.

The popularity of trivia has not gone unnoticed in ELT. Perusing journals in the field one can find descriptions of classroom activities that make use of trivia, as well as classroom adaptations of popular games shows, such as *Who wants to be a millionaire?* (Gates 2000). Despite these occasional articles, in my opinion trivia has not gotten its full due as an excellent source of content for teaching conversation. In this article, I present a rationale for utilizing trivia to teach conversation, show how trivia-based materials fit into communicative language teaching approaches, provide some examples of trivia-based activities, and explain how to use them in the classroom.

Trivia in the conversation classroom: A rationale

By its very nature, trivia leads to the asking and answering of questions. For this reason, it is ideal for teaching conversation. In an extensive study of both spoken and written English corpora, Biber et al. (1999) found that questions are five times as common in conversation as in fiction, news, and academic writing. The authors also discovered that one question occurs for every 40 words of conversation. Granted, the type of question that commonly occurs in conversation is most likely not something like *How many member states does the United Nations have?,* but rather something like *How many brothers and sisters do you have?* Nevertheless, because of the novelty of the trivia type of question, it has the potential to interest and motivate learners.

The second reason for using trivia is that it can be like a breath of fresh air in conversation classes. Much speaking practice that takes place in conversation classes, at least at the elementary and intermediate levels, is focused on developing the learners' ability to talk about themselves, for example, their families, experiences, likes, and dislikes. Considering that these topics are common in conversation outside of the classroom, there is certainly nothing wrong with this. However, learners can reach a point when they get tired of talking about themselves. Switching the topic to trivia can help avoid this situation and liven up the class.

As any teacher who has learned a foreign language already knows, it is generally much easier to talk about oneself than other topics. Using trivia in the classroom can help learners go beyond talking about themselves. As Celce-Murcia and Larsen-Freeman (1999) point out, just because learners are able to produce questions such as *How are you?* and *Where are you from?* without difficulty does not necessarily mean they have mastered the intricacies of question formation in English; rather, it is possible they have simply memorized these questions as lexicalized units. Questions about trivia will help steer learners away from these more familiar questions.

A third reason for using trivia-based activities is that they introduce a wide range of topics into the classroom, which can lead to free conversation. Teachers of conversation generally recognize that they need to encourage their learners to move beyond structured conversation and engage in free conversation. Although in some classes learners naturally gravitate toward free conversation amongst themselves and with the teacher, this is not always the case. Sometimes the problem is simply not knowing what learners are interested in talking about. Because trivia-based activities introduce a wide variety of topics into the classroom, they can help teachers develop a feel for what interests their students. In the process of using trivia-based materials, they can engage students in free conversation about these topics of interest.

Trivia and communicative language teaching

It is worthwhile to consider the idea of teaching conversation with trivia from the perspective of communicative language teaching (CLT). In an excellent discussion of the somewhat amorphous paradigm of CLT, Johnson and Johnson (1998) describe several characteristics of the standard form of this approach. One is an emphasis on messages, in other words, focusing on the meaning of what is being said rather than on the form. This focus has led to the widespread use of information transfer and information gap activities that attempt to focus learners' attention on the content of the language being used. Activities of this sort can increase learners' motivation and enable them to use the same psycholinguistic processes in the classroom that they would use to communicate outside the classroom. Johnson and Johnson (1998) maintain that this simulation of psycholinguistic processes is a second important characteristic of CLT methodology.

A third characteristic Johnson and Johnson (1998) cite is the encouragement of risk taking. By taking risks in the classroom, learners can develop communication strategies that are essential for successful interaction outside of the classroom and for the development of self confidence.

In outlining some key principles for materials development in language teaching, Tomlinson (1998) stresses the importance of capturing student interest and attention. He suggests that novelty and variety, in addition to attractive presentation and appealing content, are

essential. He also argues that it is important to design materials that lessen learners' anxiety and build their confidence.

Teaching conversation with trivia meshes quite nicely with the characteristics of CLT and the principles of materials development outlined above. First, trivia content helps to focus learners' attention on meaning. In fact, if the activities are designed carefully, there is a good chance that learners will momentarily forget they are in a language class. They will listen carefully to understand the meaning of the trivia questions, and they will try hard to supply the correct answer. When this occurs, they will be using language in the same way they use it outside the classroom, thereby matching the second characteristic of CLT: simulating authentic psycholinguistic processes.

Encouraging risk taking can also be accomplished using trivia-based materials. Learners who lack confidence in their language ability may have a great deal of confidence in their knowledge of history, sports, or pop music. Accordingly, they may be more willing to risk answering a question on one of these topics. If they do so in the target language, even if only by uttering a simple one- or two-word answer, there is a good chance that their confidence in their ability to communicate in the target language will increase.

Finally, in the field of second and foreign language education, there has been growing interest in developing learners' language awareness (LA). Advocates of LA believe that the more learners know about how language works, the better equipped they will be to deal with its inherent complexities. This applies equally to first/native and second/foreign language education. Much work in the field of LA deals with teaching learners about their first language, or teaching relatively advanced learners, such as teacher trainees, about English (see Hales 1997; Pohl 1994; Wright and Bolitho 1993). However, it can also be worthwhile to introduce LA activities at the elementary and intermediate levels. More specifically, using trivia content as part of an LA activity can be a very effective way to improve learners' language awareness. The following section includes examples of games and activities that utilize trivia content to foster language awareness in ESL and EFL students.

Adaptations of TV quiz shows and board games

Trivia games and activities may be introduced in the classroom through TV quiz shows and board games familiar to learners. In fact, TV quiz shows and board games are relatively easy to adapt, as can been seen in the following descriptions of how to adapt two TV quiz shows, *Who wants to be a millionaire?* (hereafter referred to as *Millionaire*) and *Jeopardy,* and one board game, *Trivial Pursuit.*

The first step to adapting these shows and games for the classroom is putting together a bank of questions. For advanced learners, it may be possible to use the original questions written for the native speaker audience in class. For elementary and intermediate level learners, however, teachers may need to write their own questions. While this can be time consuming, if groups of teachers work together to write questions, it can be quite enjoyable.

There are many ways to go about writing questions, of course, but one suggestion is to start with topics most likely to interest learners. After choosing them, simply brainstorm, and write as many questions as possible, keeping in mind that some easy questions should be included. If this is done several times over a span of a few weeks, it should be possible to create a usable bank of questions on several different topics. See the appendix (page 26) for four sample topics and questions I have prepared and used in my classes.

In addition to topics that match learners' interests, include questions about the English language as a way to develop learners' language awareness. Depending on the learners, use simple questions, such as *How many letters are there in the English alphabet?,* or slightly more difficult questions, such as *What language family does English belong to?* or *How many vowel sounds are there in English?*

Finally, if the learners themselves are going to be asking the questions in order to practice question formation, they should be given the answer to the question, but not the question itself. For the example above about the number of letters in the English alphabet, a learner would receive a piece of paper or card that reads, *The English alphabet has 26 letters,* and then would need to formulate and ask the question, *How many letters are there in the English alphabet?* to classmates.

Once a bank of questions has been written, it is just a matter of deciding how to use it. Let us first look at some ideas for adapting *Millionaire* for the classroom. *Millionaire* is a relatively simple game. One contestant is asked a trivia question and then given four possible answers, only one of which is correct.[1] If the contestant answers correctly, the prize money increases. There are also three "lifelines": 50/50, the telephone, and the audience, each of which the contestant can use only once.

To play this game in the classroom, the first thing to consider is class size. With small classes, the one-on-one question and answer method may work, but with larger classes modification is called for. Gates (2000) solves the problem by printing questions on a piece of paper and handing it out to learners who then work in pairs. The teacher then reads through the questions and the pairs select an answer. While this may be appropriate with beginners, doing it this way with non-beginners results in a lost opportunity for listening practice. It may be better for the teacher to divide the class into three or four groups, read the questions aloud, and have the learners listen and work together with their groups to decide on the answers.

The first lifeline, 50/50, involves reducing the number of possible answers from four to two. The second lifeline, the telephone, allows the contestant to call friends or family for help. In countries where cellular phones are widespread, it can be a lot of fun to allow learners to use their phones to call someone for help. If this is not possible, allowing them to refer to reference books or receive a hint from the teacher are possible options. The third lifeline, the audience, allows the contestant to get help from audience members. If playing the game one-on-one, the remaining class members can be the audience. Simply have them raise their hands to acknowledge which answer they think is correct. With groups, since all of the learners are participating as contestants, using the audience lifeline becomes problematic. While some students could be set aside as neutral audience members, because they will most likely end up being mostly passive observers, this is probably not advisable. One possible solution is to have the learners take turns representing their team as the person to answer the question. Then, if they want to use the audience lifeline, they can ask their teammates for help.

The final issue to consider for adapting this game to the classroom is who will ask the questions. The first time the game is played, it may be best for the teacher to act as emcee to ensure that everything proceeds smoothly. On subsequent occasions, however, having learners take turns being the emcee will make the activity more enjoyable and provide an opportunity for additional practice asking questions.

The American TV game show *Jeopardy* can also be adapted for use in the classroom. The show, while not as widely known around the world as *Millionaire,* has been on the air since the 1960s, and still remains popular in North America. In the game, three contestants compete by answering questions in six categories of five questions each. The questions are worth from $100 to $500, with the more difficult questions being worth more money.[2] Unlike *Millionaire,* the contestants are not given any choices for the answer, nor do they have any lifelines.

In an article about how to use trivia to teach listening subskills, Crawford and Powell (2001) adapt *Jeopardy* for the classroom. They suggest that teachers divide the class into three teams and have the teams take turns asking for the category and monetary amount, for example, saying *African history for $200, please.* The names of the categories are written on the board, and cards with monetary figures between $100 to $500 written on them are placed under each category. The teacher then reads the question, and if the team answers correctly they are given the card. If the answer is incorrect, the next team selects. I have also experimented with having the learners themselves write the questions and act as emcee, and have found both of these procedures work well.

One issue that must be resolved in the classroom version of this game is who answers the question. As suggested above with *Millionaire,* it is possible to have the learners take turns acting as a team representative. By doing it this way, teachers can ensure that all of the learners get a chance to answer a question, and

1. Information about the program is available at http://abc.go.com/primetime/millionaire/millionaire-home.html.

2. Information about the program is available at http://www.spe.sony.com/tv/shows/ jeopardy/home.htm.

they can also encourage cooperation among the learners by allowing the representative to get help from teammates.

Another issue is how the questions and answers are to be phrased. In the TV version of the game, the questions are read as statements, and the contestants must answer in the form of questions. Learners familiar with the show may appreciate the authenticity of playing the game this way, however, because of the complexity of this arrangement and its unnaturalness in regular conversation, it is probably best to use the answer and then question method only with advanced classes.

Playing *Jeopardy* in the classroom provides learners with an excellent chance to improve their language awareness. Categories such as *English as an international language, English grammar,* and *English slang* allow learners to practice listening and speaking in English and simultaneously learn more about the language, essentially killing two birds with one stone.

When most people think of trivia board games, they probably have in mind *Trivial Pursuit.* This game, which debuted about 20 years ago, now comes in a variety of formats, with special versions for fans of anything from *Star Wars* to NASCAR racing. The basic idea of the game is quite simple.[3] Players work their way around the game board by rolling dice and landing on spaces that direct them to answer questions (written on cards) from six categories. If a player answers the question correctly, she may roll again and try another question. While it may be possible to use the editions on the market in language classes, this will only be suitable with advanced classes in which time constraints are not an issue (the game can take several hours to play).

For the majority of language teaching situations, it will be necessary to make some major modifications. First, the game is best played in small groups of from four to seven learners, so except for classes of this size, teachers will need to find extra copies of the game or make their own game boards. The latter option is probably preferable because all that is needed is a simple board on which players move around and land on spaces that direct them to answer questions. By making adjustments to the size of the board and the number of questions, teachers can control how long the game lasts. Second, in order to use the bank of questions discussed at the beginning of this section, it will be necessary to either print the questions (or answers, as the case may be) on separate cards or small pieces of paper. After preparing the boards and the question cards, teachers can simply have the learners start playing the game, then circulate around the classroom to answer any questions that may arise.

The fact that the learners work in small groups makes using *Trivial Pursuit* attractive for teaching conversation. Conversation typically takes place in small groups, so in that sense this activity simulates real life language use. Additionally, learners will probably have more chances to both ask and answer questions using this activity than they would with *Millionaire* or *Jeopardy.*

Other activities

The three adaptations described in the previous section are among innumerable ways to use trivia content in the conversation classroom. The information transfer and information gap activities that are so popular in CLT approaches can easily be prepared using trivia content. Taking into consideration learners' interests and abilities, one could create a simple information gap in which learners ask and answer questions about winners at the Cannes film festival or the Olympics, for example.

Pictures of famous people or famous places can also be used in different ways. For example, a picture of the Eiffel Tower with facts and figures on the back—such as where it is located and when it was built—could be given to a learner, who would then form questions with the information to ask a partner or the whole class. Another idea is to simply hold up a picture and have the learners ask questions about it. If the picture is of something that interests the learners, they should be able to produce several questions about it.

Conclusion

Trivia's wide-ranging appeal and the ease with which it can be adapted to learners' interests make it a very useful source of content for teaching conversation. Teachers who are looking for new ways to practice questioning and

3. Information about the game is available at http://www.trivialpursuit.com.

answering, which is such an integral part of conversation, will probably find that trivia-based activities engage their learners and motivate them to participate actively. In addition to giving learners ample opportunity to practice meaningful communication, trivia activities can be used to develop learners' language awareness. Teachers may find they have to spend some time preparing activities, depending on their teaching contexts and the proficiency level of their students. However, in the long run they will realize it is well worth the effort.

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Finding New Messages in Television Commercials

continued from page 46.

our time was limited. I believe that of all the material I used to teach that summer, those television commercials provided the greatest range of cultural issues and colloquial vocabulary. I'm sure that my students remembered them for quite a while after their summer course was over.

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Teaching Conversation with Trivia

Appendix

Category 1: Deserts and desert life

1. What country, famous for its pyramids, has more than 90 percent of its territory covered by desert?
   Answer: Egypt
2. What do camels store in their humps, water or fat?
   Answer: fat
3. What desert, the coldest in the world, is located in northern China and Mongolia?
   Answer: the Gobi desert
4. What peninsula, under which lie the world's largest reserves of oil, is mostly covered by desert?
   Answer: the Arabian Peninsula
5. What is the name of the large plant found in the deserts of North America that also happens to be the name of an album by the Irish rock band U2?
   Answer: the Joshua tree

Category 2: Languages of the world

1. What are the two official languages of Canada?
   Answer: English and French
2. What language's writing system consists of three alphabets, hiragana, katakana, and kanji?
   Answer: Japanese
3. In what country does over 40 percent of the population speak Hindi as a first language?
   Answer: India
4. What language family do Russian, Polish, and Czech belong to?
   Answer: Slavic
5. Name three of the four official languages of Singapore.
   Answer: English, Chinese, Tamil, and Malay

Category 3: The United Nations

1. In what city is the UN headquarters located?
   Answer: New York
2. What UN agency is responsible for providing aid for children around the world?
   Answer: UNICEF
3. In what year was the UN founded?
   Answer: 1945
4. What five countries are permanent members of the UN Security Council?
   Answer: China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States
5. How many women have served as Secretary General of the UN?
   Answer: 0

Category 4: Words beginning with "U"

1. You use this when it's raining and you don't want to get wet.
   Answer: umbrella
2. This is what you call your mother's or father's brother.
   Answer: uncle
3. This is the opposite of beautiful.
   Answer: ugly
4. This is a radioactive element that is used in nuclear power plants.
   Answer: uranium
5. This is similar to a bicycle, but has only one wheel.
   Answer: unicycle

Testing Writing in the EFL Classroom…

continued from page 19.

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news & notes

The Third Symposium on Second Language Writing

will be held on October 11-12, 2002 at
Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA.

The Symposium on Second Language Writing is a biennial international conference that brings together teachers and researchers who work with second and foreign language writers to discuss important issues in the field of second language writing. This year's Symposium, entitled "Constructing Knowledge: Approaches to Inquiry in Second Language Writing," will feature sixteen scholars who will explore various ways in which knowledge is constructed, transformed, disseminated, and negotiated in the field of second language writing. In conjunction with the Third Symposium, the Indiana Center for Intercultural Communication will sponsor a Contrastive Rhetoric Roundtable at Purdue University on Sunday, October 13, 2002. The Roundtable is free with Symposium registration. For more information, please visit: http://icdweb.cc.purdue.edu/~silvat/symposium/2002/.