

Basic Activities for Multilevel Groups

If you and I are standing together at the bus stop, and I say to you, “Hey, do you see that sign?” and you say “Where?” I will probably point in the direction of the object I want you to see to help guide your attention. I might point with my **index** finger to **indicate** what I’m referring to. This is such a subtle and powerful communication technique, it often goes underneath our awareness. And it works across language barriers too. The power to point to something, to indicate something, is where the term “indicative mood” comes from – objective, declarative statements like “The table is red” vs. the “subjunctive mood” (“If the table were red, I’d toss it in the street.”)

This is important because the **power of pointing** solves a major practical problem that many language skills development professionals have when working with low skill language learners: how do you communicate when you don’t speak the same language?

You use the power of pointing.

The activities below are not complicated, but many people have trouble doing them because they don’t reflect what we think teaching should look like. We think of teaching as explaining meaning:

“A is the first letter of the alphabet.”

instead of directing learners’ attention:

“Point to the A”.

If you’re looking at a sheet of paper with the alphabet, when you say these words, a learner has to pull enough meaning from the context to point to the A. If they don’t point to A, or point to another letter, you know that the meaning of the request was not conveyed (or, understood but not complied with). If they do point to A, you can be sure that somehow they understood and complied with your request.

This is the essence of **listening-based activities with a visual/audio monitor**. These techniques are the basic building blocks of any language skills development that involves developing learners’ oral skills. They are frequently overlooked or downplayed by academically trained or novice teachers.

In this program you will learn how to use these listening-based activities which are extremely effective at developing language skills in a multilevel classroom – and they bring people together, too!

Listen & Point

Listen & Point requires that each learner be able to point to some object in the room or on a sheet. Normally, if it's in the room, everyone should be able to see the object and point to it unambiguously (that is, "window" won't work well if there are 12 windows in the room; images on an eraseable board won't work well if you can't tell which item learners are pointing to). Usually, when the objects are on a piece of paper, each person should have their own piece of paper and they need to be exactly the same. Each person should have a pointer (a pencil or pen). Physical objects should be in the center of the entire group.

- i. Say "Show me your pencil" if the activity involves each person having their own sheet of paper
- ii. Say the name of an object in the room or on the paper. Encourage people to look at each other and work together.
- iii. Select a second object to point to. Go back and forth between the two a couple of times so learners get a chance to hear the different words or sounds.
- iv. Now add in a third. Start to go back and forth between the three and build up a rhythm, giving folks a chance to hear those differences.
- v. Go a little faster and try to mess them up a little bit.
- vi. Add a fourth and continue to go back and forth between them, speeding up when people seem to be tracking it well, and slowing it down when they seem to start to get confused. You can continue to add new items in, and make sure that you repeat earlier items as well.

Give as much positive feedback as you can – "You got it!" is what we use all of the time. When someone doesn't have it, rather than saying "No, that's not it" – point to someone nearby who does have it, and say "She's got it!".

When Listen & Point is done on paper, the amount of text or images should be relatively low-density. If it's very dense with information, you want to do a document search. Low-density information allows you to go for speed and multiple repetitions, and also allows you to see what everyone is pointing to just by their relative position on the paper.

Document Search

At first, this activity appears very similar to the Listen & Point – but the experience of this is quite different. It's always done with text on a page. And the text on a page is always rather dense (like the page you're reading right now). This makes it more of a scanning exercise than the quick response "whack-a-mole" feel that Listen & Point has.

- i. Make sure that every person has a copy of the page, and they all have exactly the same page. Work with a single page at a time.
- ii. Start with something at the top of the page – say a word or short phrase that should be pretty obvious. It's always best to start with something obvious – you will find that what seems obvious to you may not be to your learners. Encourage them to work together and use lots of positive feedback to let people know when they've got it.
- iii. Move a little way down the page, and choose another word or phrase.
- iv. Continue with items on the page until you feel like you've explored it.

To make it more challenging > jump around the page more instead of moving through it in a predictable top to bottom fashion.

Full phrases are usually easier to find than single words.

Avoid showing anyone where the item is unless the group is absolutely stumped. Instead, repeat the item several times and give people a chance to find it.

As soon as someone gets it, immediately point to that person and say "You've got it!" – that will clue other learners in to look to that person for help.

You'll need to be cautious of single words that are repeated multiple times on a page just to avoid confusion – short phrases will fix this.

From time to time, you can create interest by having the group "Choral Response" the word or phrase (see below)

Listen & Do

By now, you'll recognize that there is some similarity in these activities – the facilitator/instructor says something, and the learners demonstrate that they've heard it by responding with an action. The essential difference between these activities is the channel of demonstration. Sometimes they shout, sometimes they point, sometimes they write. In this activity, they'll make a gesture with their bodies. Using different channels makes it stick better by increasing engagement and appealing to different learning styles.

- i.** Before the class, think of 10 action verbs with clear gestural demonstrations. *Eat, Drink, Walk, Run* are excellent. *Shop, Return, Determine, Express* are much more difficult to model with an action. It's important to write these down, and think in advance about the action you'll use.
- ii.** Begin the activity in class by saying a verb. Like other similar activities, it's generally better to start with one almost everyone is likely to know, such as *eat*.
- iii.** It's very common that the group, if this activity is new to them, will repeat the word after you. If so, say "Don't say it, do it!" You may need to cover your mouth and/or model the action. Often, though, someone in the group will be able to make the action – immediately point to them, and say "You've got it!" and say the verb again – "eat!" and urge the rest of the group to do it in unison.
- iv.** After the group learns that you want them to make an action for the word you say, choose another word that is likely to be known by most people – e.g., *drink*. You shouldn't have to teach them this time – they should just do it.
- v.** Move back and forth quickly between these first two several times until you think that they might be tuning out – then switch it up on them by either saying one of the verbs twice in a row, or adding a third verb.
- vi.** Now go back and forth between the three, going faster and switching it up when it feels easy; slowing down and getting more consistent when they're seeming confused. In this way, you'll keep everyone engaged and push everyone where they need to be pushed.

Listen & Do is the quintessential example of a "Total Physical Response" activity, which is one of the major language teaching methodologies. This technique is generally considered to be ideal for lower-skill learners, but when used effectively can keep higher skill learners engaged and progressing as well.

Modifications of this activity can include giving directions where learners are miming or actually doing the instructions you're giving them.

Choral Response

We should probably refer to this family of activity as “Call and Response” because it essentially is drawn from this mode of oral cultural transmission. Most people associate this form with Sub-Saharan Africa, but along with storytelling and drawing, are one of major forms of cultural transmission in oral cultures.

Literacy is a big issue when teaching language & cultural skills in the community-based setting. There are nearly always a couple of learners who can't write very well, if at all. Language teachers struggle with this, particularly in a multilevel class, because generally, they are using worksheets or writing on the board. These modes of communication aren't wrong in themselves, but generally cater to those with better developed literacy skills, and continue to marginalize those with lower literacy skills.

The answer is to increase the proportion of activities that don't rely on writing – or increase the number of activities that emphasize oral skills over writing. One of the best ways to do this is by having an instructor shout something out loud, and then have the group shout it back. This has many other benefits for a multilevel group because it raises group energy, makes people feel included, allows shy learners to step back and blend in, and lets the facilitator “hear” whether the group is getting it or not.

- i.** Say the sentence a single time at normal or just above normal speed.
- ii.** Say the first word of the sentence and cup your hand behind your ear, leaning in to indicate that you'd like to hear them say it. If the group doesn't respond, say “C'mon everybody (x)!” and they should repeat (x).
- iii.** After there is a good solid group repetition of the first word, go through the rest of the words in the sentence. This will help them hear and say each individual word.
- iv.** If the sentence is short, then repeat the whole sentence quickly and see how well they are able to repeat it. If the sentence is longer, then repeat small phrasal chunks of two or three words, and then end with the entire sentence.
- v.** If you want to ensure that everyone was able to hear the phrase, go around the room and have each person repeat it.

Group Dictation

When I was in elementary school, I thought one of the most insulting teaching modes was dictation. It was boring and decontextualized, focusing only on information and details, and avoiding understanding. So, it took a long time until I was able to see how powerful dictation is for language learning.

It gets right to the heart of the reason why language teaching seems so haphazard in its results – it's the belief that the ability to use a language with fluency is a matter of understanding the meaning of words outside of their real-world applications, of grasping concepts – whether concepts described by language, or grammatical concepts.

But learning to use a language to communicate with other people is not about learning **about** the language. It's about practicing the vocal acrobatics involved with producing and communicating meaning. It's like learning to bake a pie as opposed to understanding a recipe.

And so it turns out that dictation is incredibly useful in a language classroom and with a few modifications, works very well for a multilevel group and brings people together. The key is to make sure the levels are well mixed in the room, and encourage people to share and work together. This takes the pressure off the instructor to manage everyone's performance, as well. We call this "Group Dictation."

- i. Choose a phrase/sentence that you think is challenging enough to be interesting to the highest skilled learner, but not more than 10 words. In a multilevel group, you'll probably want to stick with a single clause.
- ii. Say the phrase out loud, a little faster than normal speech. Say it again. Make a writing motion with your hand. It might help to say "Write it down!"
- iii. As learners begin to try to write it down, all instructors and assistants should repeat the phrase often (at least 5 times per person). This gives learners a chance to hear different tempos and accents, and the multiple repetitions make a huge difference for comprehension and parsing the sounds.
- iv. Throughout the process, instructors will encourage and look for people who are getting parts right or very nearly correct, point at their paper and say "You Got It!" Encourage others to look on other learners' papers and share with each other. This brings them together and makes everyone feel supported.
- v. If nobody is able to get a certain word or phrase, you'll want to spell it. When doing so, it's always better to spell the entire word correctly, emphasizing the letters that need to be altered.

Compound Activities for Multilevel Groups

Round Robin

Another elementary school snoozer is called round-robin reading. Though I never experienced it when I was younger, I first experienced it in a Spanish class. It was a class I really liked with a teacher I really liked, but like almost all strategies used in these classrooms, I felt frustrated by them, but I wasn't sure why.

In round robin reading, everyone is looking at the same text, and one person is called on to read part of a passage, or the turn goes around the circle. Usually, the reader hasn't practiced the part they're reading. The rest of the group is supposed to read along. The idea wouldn't be so bad if it worked, because there is an attempt here to bring in an element of surprise and to keep everyone engaged. One of the main reasons it doesn't work is because people can't read something they haven't heard yet. It's like you're testing them without giving them a chance to practice. They don't know what they don't know.

But with a slight modification, this can be excellent oral practice in a small or medium sized group (over 15 learners and you'll have to modify it because it takes too long to get around the room).

- i. Choose a question/answer combination that has a well-defined answer response, such as "How many children do you have?"
- ii. Choose a person in the room to model the question/answer pair – ideally, a high skill person or an assistant. Start off by saying their name, "Hey, Jacquie!" – and they should respond in kind. You'll then say, "How many children do you have?" "I have 2 children."
- iii. Repeat the question part, like you are doing a dictation, and make a motion for them to write it down. Follow the same procedures as Group Dictation. Then follow the procedure for Choral Response, to ensure that they have had a chance to hear it, write it, and say it out loud.
- iv. Now, think of your learner group as a circle, and choose a person near to you who has a relatively high skill level (possibly the same assistant you modeled with earlier). **Make sure you start by greeting them by name, and having them return the greeting** – it adds a huge social and tension reducing element. Coach them through asking each other the question.
- v. After each pair finishes, then the answerer will become the questioner with the person next to them.

Try to ensure that the answers to the questions don't vary too much, or it will be too challenging for low-skill learners. Aim for precision and speed.

Dialogue Progression

This activity incorporates almost every element mentioned before, and is very effective for bringing together highly contextualized language practice with writing, reading, listening and speaking elements.

It's worth underscoring that we are still working with *receptive* skills primarily. The activities are highly structured and they are not designed for free production practice. That kind of practice is very important, but it doesn't work well in a mixed-level environment. Low skill learners need more structure, and contextualized dialogues give them the structure they need, while providing expanded relevance and pronunciation/fluency practice for the higher skill learners.

- i.** Write out a 4-line dialogue that uses natural spoken language in some real world area – at the doctor's office, in the post office, etc. Do this before class, and don't think too hard about it, but it does help to say it out loud.
- ii.** In the classroom, model with a high-skill learner or one of the assistants, as outlined in Round Robin.
- iii.** Starting with the first line, say it out loud and have everyone write it down, making a writing motion, following the procedure for Group Dictation.
- iv.** Once it's written down, use the procedure in Choral Response to practice pronunciation and repeat multiple times.
- v.** Once you've thoroughly practiced a line, move on to the next line. Do this with all four lines.
- vi.** After you have gone through all four lines, then use the Choral Response technique to practice the entire dialogue. Repeat lines multiple times that present trouble.

After you have gone through this, you can continue to deepen the practice in a number of different ways:

- Facilitator says one line, and the group responds with the next line
- Divide group in half, one side says one line, the other side says the other
- Split the group into two lines, facing each other, and have one side say one line, and the other respond with the other; then move one side of the group down so that each person has a different partner
- Learners practice in pairs while reading from their sheet – then have them practice from memory
- Learners form two lines, so that only the front two people are facing each other; then have both go to the back of each others' lines
- Pairs practice then perform in front of the entire group

Keep in mind that longer than 4 lines will take a long time to do, and possibly frustrate lower skill learners