

Drills, Dialogues, and Role Plays

A LESSON NEVER FORGOTTEN

“Jambo!” is hello in Swahili. The authors of this book participated in several short introductory language learning experiences during their teacher training. Mary studied Swahili, which was taught with the judicious use of drills and dialogues and contends that it is the language in which she can still most easily respond to simple greetings, say a few simple phrases, and ask some questions.

Drills and dialogues are among the most traditional materials used by language teachers. The content of drills and dialogues and how much we use them has changed considerably over the years. This is because teachers and materials developers have been paying more and more attention to ways of providing students with meaningful materials and content that allow them to engage in “real” communication. Role plays and plays, which are often forms of extended dialogues, are part of the repertoire of practice activities and materials.

This chapter includes:

- the advantages and limitations of drills and dialogues in language development
- various types of drills and dialogues
- how to design and adapt drills that are meaningful rather than mechanical
- how to make and adapt dialogues for your class
- how to prepare role plays suitable for your students and teaching objectives
- the advantages and uses of role plays (including plays, simulations and sociodramas)
- how to involve students in developing dialogues and role plays (including plays, simulations, and sociodramas)

Some Challenging Questions

Before you begin, answer these questions:

- What is your opinion of using drills in language teaching? Under what circumstances would you use them? When would you select other teaching materials?
 - Have you ever learned a language or taught using drills? What was your experience in learning from or teaching using drills?
 - Have you ever tried to make drills more communicative? How could you do this?
 - Have you ever developed or adapted role plays, plays, simulations, or sociodramas for teaching? Have you experienced any of these activities as a learner? What is your opinion of these activities for language teaching?
-

Drills as Language Teaching Material

Definition and Uses of Drills

A drill is “A type of highly controlled oral practice in which the students respond to a given cue. The response varies according to the type of drill.” (Matthews, Spratt, and Dangerfield 1991, 210). Drills are used usually at the controlled practice stage of language learning so that students have the opportunity to accurately try out what they have learned. Drills help students to develop quick, automatic responses using a specific formulaic expression or structure, such as a tag ending, verb form, or transformation.

Drills have been much maligned for their behavioristic, stimulus-response nature and for the mechanical, repetitive practice they provide. In classrooms that use the audiolingual method, which became popular in the 1950s, drills are basic to language teaching.

Many of us know that drill-based lessons are not always particularly stimulating. In fact, you may remember language drills in which you could accurately respond in the drill without knowing what you were saying. There’s a joke among language teachers: “Dictionary definition: Drill—a device for boring” (Hubbard 1990, 19). However, drills do respond to the learning style of those who learn well through memorization and repetition.

Drills can be useful teaching-learning material because they provide practice of small, manageable chunks of language. This helps to build confidence and automatic use of structures and expressions that have been drilled. Also, they can be part of a teaching or learning sequence that progresses from more towards less controlled practice.

Mary Spratt (1991) notes that drills can be either mechanical or meaningful. Mechanical drills are controlled by the teacher who provides drill cues to which

students respond. These drills can give beginning students a chance to articulate the new language fluently. Meaningful drills are controlled by the teacher as well as by the students who must understand the drill cues in order to respond. Meaningful drills are more desirable than mechanical drills because they provide a reason for speaking and are thus more engaging and motivating. Spratt (10–11) points out these requisites for meaningful drills:

- They should look like real language, containing hesitations, proper social reactions such as exclamations, questions, or comments that require a response. They can even consider register and nonverbal elements.
- The response should not be totally predictable; a variety of responses should be incorporated.
- They should involve genuine reactions between or among the speakers.
- They should be purposeful and based on topics of relevance to students
- They should be sufficiently controlled and allow the teacher to observe how well learning has taken place.
- They should allow for sustained language practice.

Types of Drills

A drill is a drill is a drill, right? Not so! They come in various forms—repetition drills, substitution drills, and transformation drills are among the main types. Each type of drill can be meaningful or mechanical, depending upon how you develop it. We will explain several types of drills on the following pages.

REPETITION DRILLS

Repetition drills are useful for familiarizing students quickly with a specific structure or formulaic expression (Doff 1990, 71). The teacher's language is repeated with no change. Be sure to teach the meaning of the utterance first. The example that follows illustrates this type of drill:

Teacher: It's cold outside.

Students: It's cold outside.

Teacher: It's warm outside.

Students: It's warm outside.

Because repetition drills are extremely mechanical, they should not be used for prolonged practice. Preferably they should lead quickly into another kind of drill or oral practice activity that allows students to manipulate the form being practiced in meaningful and relevant ways.

SUBSTITUTION DRILLS

Substitution drills are slightly more interactive than repetition drills because they usually give students practice in changing a word or structure in response to a prompt or cue from the teacher or another student. The teacher's prompt can be a whole sentence, a word, a phrase, or a picture. Here is a mechanical substitution drill using a single-word (in italics) prompt:

Teacher: You're a student, aren't you?
farmer

Students: You're a farmer, aren't you?

Teacher: You're a farmer, aren't you?
accountant

Students: You're an accountant, aren't you?

Teacher: You're an accountant, aren't you?
mechanic

Students: You're a mechanic, aren't you?

Teacher: You're a mechanic, aren't you?

Here is an example of a mechanical substitution drill using a phrase (in italics) as a prompt:

Teacher: Where were you born? Can you tell me?
was your husband

Students: Where was your husband born?

Teacher: Where was your husband born? Can you tell me?
was he

Students: Where was he born?

Teacher: Where was he born? Can you tell me?
was your daughter

Students: Where was your daughter born?

Teacher: Where was your daughter born? Can you tell me?

TRANSFORMATION DRILLS

Transformation drills involve changing the structure of a sentence. If the cue is *I like ice cream*, for example, the response in a positive to negative statement transformation drill could be *I don't like ice cream*. Raymond Clark (1987, 84) lists these types of transformations:

- Statement to question: e.g., *I like ice cream*. To: *Do you like ice cream?*
- One tense to another tense: e.g., *I'm going shopping*. To: *Yesterday I went shopping*.
- Active to passive: e.g., *The teacher gave them the answers*. To: *They were given the answers by the teacher*.
- Singular subject to plural subject: e.g., *The woman sings well*. To: *The women sing well*.

You will find it relatively easy to develop substitution and transformation drills to provide students with practice in automatic manipulation of a form. However, students often forget what they have learned in drills. Drills have also been criticized because students can repeat drills without understanding what they are saying (Spratt, 9). Yet, short periods of drills can be useful during the early stages of a lesson, and you are advised to move on after five or ten minutes to other oral practice activities or to drills that are more meaningful.

It is best to do mechanical drills before you begin meaningful drills, which are more difficult because students have to provide information in addition to the correct language form. Meaningful drills still involve repetition or substitution of structures in response to prompts, but they are more relevant and motivating. This is because students have to think about and understand what they are saying and express meaning through their responses. Because meaningful drills are somewhat unpredictable, they are more like real language so there is more reason for students to listen attentively than during practice with mechanical drills.

Making Drills Meaningful

Spratt suggests that you can make drills meaningful by using pictures to provide meaning or by giving students choices in their replies to cues. Allowing students choice means they have to think before they comment. Choice can mean allowing students to add something personal to their responses as in the example below. Use the truth principle—students must respond with a true statement about themselves. Even with this principle in mind, it is important to remember that drills are materials for providing controlled practice. A meaningful drill is designed to exert enough control over students' production to minimize errors but also to provide no more control than is necessary. Here is an example of a meaningful drill to practice the modal *could*. It is meaningful because responses are unpredictable and give students choices.

- Teacher:** I'm bored.
- Student 1:** You could read a book.
- Student 2:** You could go to a movie.
- Student 3:** You could call a friend.
- Student 4:** You could clean up your room!

Here is an example of a meaningful drill that demands a personal response.

- Teacher:** I get tired of doing the same thing every day. I've always wanted to be a pilot.
- Student 1:** How exciting! I'd rather be a stunt person in the movies.
- Student 2:** That's too exciting for me. I'd rather be a movie star.
- Student 3:** Not me. I'd rather be a famous writer.

Here are some additional tips from Doff, Clark, and others for developing drills.

- Base your drill on your objectives.
- Whether you are using mechanical or meaningful drills, it is important that your drills are relevant to your learners' realm of experience and knowledge of the world.
- Include opportunities for students to accurately use the target form or expression in your drill. Ensure that the target for the practice is central and that you develop the drill in a way that students must say it correctly.
- The structures being practiced should reflect authentic use. Although it is sometimes necessary to isolate and simplify language in order to focus on a

particular point, older textbooks sometimes included drills and dialogues that taught students to respond in unnatural ways in an attempt to provide practice of a particular structure. These kinds of exercises result in students that “sound like textbooks” when they speak English.

- Whatever type of drill you develop, limit the vocabulary to common words that don’t distract students from making the statements or the substitutions.
- Develop the drill in a way that you can check students’ progress and understanding as they participate in it.
- Limit your drill to between 15 and 20 sentences.

Presenting Drills

When presenting drills, provide students with a written example on a handout or on the board or as a transparency. Model the drill with another student, or have two students model the drill for the rest of the class. If you are conducting the drill, observe student responses carefully to assess learning. If students are working in pairs or groups, circulate and observe, assisting where necessary. Be sure to end the drill before it becomes tedious. You can do a follow-up, especially to meaningful drills, by having each student write up the drill as a dialogue.

Drills are often presented with the teacher at the front of the class and the students responding. You can add variety by tossing a ball or beanbag to the student who is to respond. This keeps everyone alert because they cannot anticipate who will be called on next. In a question-answer drill format, the student who receives the ball responds to you and then asks a question of the next student who is to receive the ball.

Chain drills also add variety. Rather than having all the students repeat the same thing, have students sit in a circle or semicircle. Then have one student ask the next student a question to which he or she responds as in this example of a class of five students. If you have a large class, you can have several circles of up to ten students doing this activity while you circulate. Note that you start by modeling what is expected.

Teacher: My name is Mary, and I like eating. What about you?

Student 1: My name is Earnest, and I like reading. What about you?

Student 2: My name is Anatoli, and I like camping. What about you?

Student 3: My name is Marina, and I like singing. What about you?

Student 4: My name is Martin, and I like swimming. What about you?

Student 5: My name is Svetlana, and I like dating! What about you?

For more advanced students, this model can be used:

Teacher: My name is Ruth, and I’ve always wanted to be a gypsy. What have you always wanted to do?

Student 1: My name is XingXing, and I’ve always wanted to be a rock star. What have you always wanted to do?

Student 2: My name is Chinghua, and I’ve wanted to be a snowboard champion. What have you always wanted to do?

And, for extra challenge, try this:

Teacher: My name is Ruth, and I've always wanted to be a gypsy. How about you?

Student 1: Your name is Ruth, and you've always wanted to be a gypsy. My name is XingXing, and I've always wanted to be a rock star.

Student 2: Your name is Ruth, and you've always wanted to be a gypsy. Her name is XingXing, and she's always wanted to be a rock star. My name is Chinghua, and I've always wanted to be a snowboard champion.

Student 3: Your name is Ruth, and you've always wanted to be a gypsy. Her name is XingXing, and she's always wanted to be a rock star. Her name is Chinghua, and she's always wanted to be a snowboard champion. My name is Xiaohui, and I've always wanted to be a concert pianist.

This drill ends with you repeating the aspirations of the entire class. Obviously, you shouldn't try this with groups larger than about fifteen students. The next section deals with dialogues.

Dialogues as Language Teaching Material

Dialogues, Definition, Uses, and Adaptations

Dialogues are popular activities in ESL textbooks for a number of linguistic as well as cultural reasons. You can use or adapt dialogues to:

- demonstrate grammar in context
- facilitate conversation—This may parallel grammar instruction, but also gives specific language practice, for example, use of gambits and formulaic expression or language. Gambits and formulaic expression or language are common phrases or multiword units found useful in developing fluency in both adults and children (Wood 2002).
- provide recreation such as a skit—These dialogues are bridging activities that provide spontaneous use of learner knowledge.

Dialogues usually present spoken language within a context and are thus typically longer than drills. However, those used for oral practice should be short so students remember them.

Dialogues are primarily used to provide speaking practice but can also develop listening. You can use dialogues to introduce and practice a function, structure, or vocabulary, and to illustrate degrees of politeness, levels of formality, and values and attitudes of the target culture. You can also work with students to analyze written dialogues for any of these features. Dialogues are useful for listening to and practicing pronunciation, intonation, and other phonological features. Like drills, they are usually materials for guided, rather than free, language practice.

You can combine dialogues with writing by having students make comics with pictures and bubble dialogue boxes to fill in. You may develop longer dialogues to provide a stimulus to problem solving and discussion about a topic. For example,

one dialogue in Jill Bell and Marjatta Holt (1988) focuses on discrimination and landlord and tenant rights. Longer dialogues are also useful for listening practice.

Standard Printed Dialogues

Printed dialogues usually consist of several short exchanges between two people, as in this shopping dialogue:

- A:** Hello. May I help you?
B: No thanks. I'm just looking.
A: Well, let me know if you need anything.
B: Okay, thank you.

These kinds of dialogues are especially useful for introducing common expressions to beginners. It helps them to develop a bank of authentic expressions and vocabulary that they can use immediately. Students who have studied a lot of English grammar in an EFL situation can also benefit from dialogues that introduce them to genuine spoken language.

DEVELOPING AND ADAPTING STANDARD DIALOGUES

You will find standard printed dialogues in many textbooks. You may find, however, that a textbook dialogue is not appropriate for some reason. For example, the expressions used are British and not what is heard in your teaching context, the language used does not sound natural or authentic, or the dialogue contains too many complex structures or difficult words. You may also decide to teach language for a situation that is not found in your textbook or personalize the dialogue to your students' needs and interests. These are instances where you will want to adapt or write your own dialogues. Here are some points to keep in mind when writing or adapting dialogues for students to practice (based on Slager 1976 cited in Omaggio 1984 and Graham 1992).

- Use "natural" language as much as possible. Include exclamations and expressions where appropriate; avoid a strict question-answer-question sequence.
- Keep the dialogue short enough so that students can easily remember it, but long enough to provide context. For dialogues used for speaking practice, two to three exchanges are sufficient (A-B, A-B, A-B).
- Apply current sociolinguistic norms. For example, an informal North American introduction is *Hi, nice to meet you*, rather than *How do you do?*
- Depict situations in the dialogue that are relevant and useful to the learner. This can include setting the dialogue in a place the students know and using familiar place names.
- Reflect students' level of sophistication and knowledge in the content.
- Retain truth value in the dialogue. It should not require students to say something in the classroom that they would not say in the "real world."
- Create characters who "are realistic in that they have some personality and relate to the learners' experience in some way" (Slager 1976 cited in Omaggio 1986, 184). For example, the characters in a dialogue focusing on

talking about family members might be students in a language class telling each other about their families.

- Decide on your language focus such as social issues, student problems, cultural information, grammar points, functions, vocabulary. If you select a function, imagine yourself taking part in the activity and ask yourself what language you use. If you choose a grammatical focus, imagine a context in which the chosen structure occurs naturally.
- List words, expressions, and idioms you can imagine yourself using that are related to the function or situation.
- Choose vocabulary that could be realistically used between two people.
- Focus on the most common language used in a particular social context—between acquaintances, between a boss and an employee, between a teacher and a parent, between a landlord and tenant.
- Try out the dialogue with a colleague before using it with students.

Presenting and Practicing Standard Dialogues

Here are different ways of presenting dialogues:

- Students look at a picture that provides the dialogue context. Ask students what they think the people are saying. Repeat back in correct English what the students generate.
- Students listen to the dialogue and report what they hear.
- Students are given the text of the dialogue. Let them listen to the dialogue again, this time reading it as it is presented.
- The teacher explains and demonstrates meanings.
- Students repeat the dialogue in unison. You can divide the class in two halves for further practice. Or you can be one speaker, and the students can be the other speaker.
- Students practice the dialogue in pairs.
- For literacy students, one way to present a dialogue is to make one card strip for each sentence in the dialogue and use two different colors, one for statements and another for questions (Cassar 1990).

We use standard utterances in many situations, such as greetings and leave-takings, and accepting and refusing invitations. Dialogues can be useful for learning this kind of language. However, their usefulness is limited because the text is predetermined so students don't create their own responses as they must do in real life. The types of dialogues that follow allow for more student input. You might want to use them after controlled practice with standard dialogues.

Open Dialogues

In open dialogues, the teacher provides only one half of the dialogue. Students invent the other half. This often leads to practice in responding to conversational cues but not to initiating conversation. However, such dialogues have value in allowing students to produce their own responses. Here are some variations.

Variation 1

For a controlled open dialogue, make a cloze-like dialogue where you write down part of each student’s dialogue but leave blanks in the dialogue for each student to fill in, as in this example:

A: Do you know if the library is open on _____?

B: Yes, _____.

or

No, I _____ think so.

A: What hours is it open?

B: _____ open from _____ to _____.

Variation 2

Another variation on open dialogues is a dialogue with choices such as this telephone conversation dialogue. Student A and Student B each have different handouts.

Student A Handout

A: Yes
or
Hello

B:

A: This is Thuy

B:

Student B Handout

A:

B: Hello, Can I speak to Thuy?
or
Hi.

A:

B: Thuy, do you want to come over for coffee?
or
Hi, Thuy. This is Mary.
Do you want to come over for coffee?

Variation 3

Advanced textbooks sometimes present a variety of expressions and vocabulary that can be used to convey similar meaning, such as:

- Well, I guess I’d. . . .
- Oh, I might. . . .
- I think I’d. . . .

In this dialogue, students choose from among the expressions presented in order to carry out the dialogue:

A: If you could . . .
 Suppose you could . . . } take 3 things to a desert island, what would you take?

B: I } could } take my dog.
 would probably }
 might }

A: That would be a good idea!

Is that right?

Teachers instruct students to practice the dialogues with a partner, using these cues for A. If you could:

- have 3 wishes, what would you wish?
- meet any famous person in the world, who would you choose?
- live anywhere in the world, where would you live?

Variation 4

This final variation incorporates free practice by having students continue a dialogue beyond what is scripted. You may have students present their dialogue to the rest of the class.

Cue Card Dialogues

Instead of using a standard printed dialogue or open dialogues, you can give students more linguistic input by using cue cards that give instructions for performing a sequence of communicative acts designed to fit in with a corresponding sequence on a partner’s card. You can make these yourself or adapt them from standard dialogues. Many intermediate textbooks employ this format for presenting dialogues. Here are sample cue cards for a dialogue on asking directions.

Card A
 You have just moved to a new neighborhood. You ask your neighbor where you can find the following places: the bank, the grocery store, post office, the school.

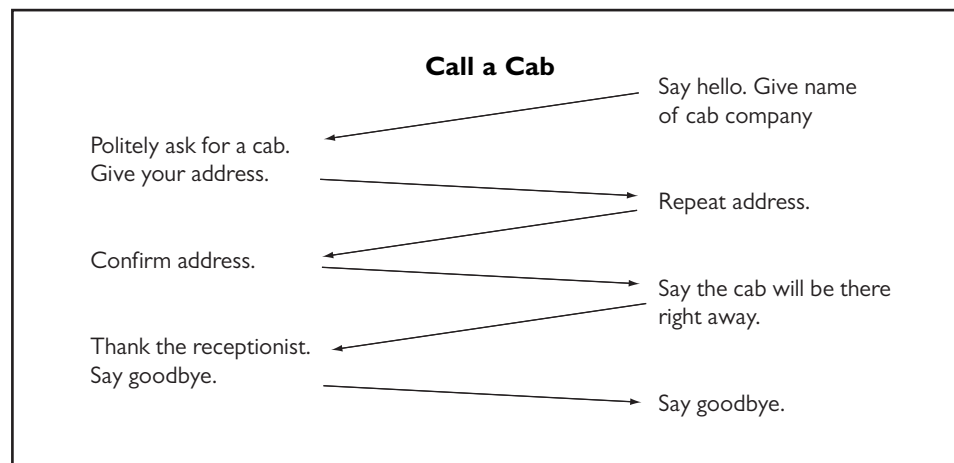
Card B
 A new neighbor asks where to find local services. Use this information to help: bank—2 blocks north; grocery store—around the corner to the left; post office—next to the bank; school—on the corner of Main Street and 3rd Avenue.

Discourse Chains

Like cue cards, discourse chains described by Spratt (1991, 8–12) are another dialogue format providing students greater responsibility for determining how they will use language to perform various functions. They should be sequenced later in a lesson than standard dialogues and drills. Students can present their discourse chain results in class.

Discourse chains are usually presented to students in a diagram, with the exchanges between speakers listed in the order they naturally occur.

While students are participating in the chain, you should circulate to identify any difficulties. Spratt suggests you use discourse chains to consolidate lessons. You should not see students' alternate responses as errors but as opportunities for self-expression and further teaching. In the example that follows, students practice calling a taxi. You could expand the dialogue to include giving and following directions to your address. You could add interest by having students recall a taxi that had not shown up on schedule to practice making complaints. Can you think of other ways to adapt this discourse chain or other topics for developing a similar chain?



Information Gaps

Information gaps presented with dialogue prompts on cue cards work well particularly for students of higher proficiency levels. In information gap activities an individual student or one group of students has access to some information that is withheld from another student or group of students. The second student group must acquire this information in order to complete a task successfully. Information gaps are stimulating because they contain problem solving. Information gap activities provide extensive practice in asking and answering questions and giving directions, and allow students to handle information in a more realistic manner than other classroom practice activities.

Here is an information gap for an advanced class to practice register and persuasion. For variation, try it as a simulated phone call.

1. Learners are put into pairs. One person in the pair is the customer and receives a yellow cue card; the other person is the sales clerk and receives a blue cue card.
2. Learners read their cards but do not show them to their partner. They develop a dialogue, rehearse it and then role-play for the class.
3. This is followed by a class discussion on each situation.

Sample Yellow Cards	Sample Blue Cards
As a regular customer of Jake's Dry Cleaning, you are dismayed to find that Jake's has torn your best suit. You decide to get financial compensation from Jake so that you can buy a new suit for your job interview tomorrow.	You are the cashier at Jake's Dry Cleaning. Your boss, Jake, is on vacation. You have strict instructions not to get involved in customer complaints while Jake is away.
You bought a CD at a local shop. When you opened it, you discovered a long, deep scratch right across it. You decide to exchange it for a new copy so that you can play it at your party that evening.	You are the manager of a music shop. All your CDs come from a foreign distributor, and their quality is guaranteed. Your shop's policy is not to take back damaged merchandise but have customers themselves return it directly to the distributor.
You have been shopping all over town for a sweater for a gift. No one has the color or size you seek except for one store. The sweater costs \$75.00, but you have only \$60.00 to spend. Then you discover a snag in the sweater. You try to convince the salesperson to give you a discount.	You are a store owner. Your store prides itself in having unique merchandise. In order to maintain your reputation for excellence, your policy is never to reduce your prices. You have had a bad season, but you are convinced that lowering your prices will not save your store.

Source: R. Epstein, *EDCUR 391.3/TESL 31: TESL Theory and Skills Development: Course Notes* (Saskatoon, SK: Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan, 2001a). Reprinted with permission.

Student-Generated Dialogues

Student-generated dialogues work well with beginners and low-intermediate students. They are scripted and thus do not involve the unpredictability of real communication, but the students rather than the teacher write the script. Encouraging students to write their own dialogues also allows you to assess a variety of language skills. The focus for the dialogue may be provided by any of these:

- a scene from a film or video—you might watch the scene without the sound and ask students to write a dialogue for it
- a picture or series of pictures

- a comic strip with the words deleted, or a made-for-ESL or EFL comic strip sequence such as those found in *LexiCarry* (Moran 2002)
- a language function or grammar structure you have been studying
- several idioms that you ask students to incorporate into writing a dialogue

You can motivate a lower-level class by drawing two stick people on the board with dialogue bubbles above their heads, along with some indicators of the subject of the conversation such as a sunny or cloudy sky or a couple of words. Then ask students to fill in the bubbles. After they have done so, they perform the dialogue in pairs as an ice-breaker and as a first oral practice activity for the class.

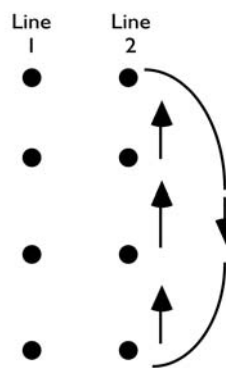
If you use a scene from a movie, a made-for-ESL video recording, or a comic strip, choose it according to your teaching objectives. For example, if you are teaching language useful for travel, you might choose two segments of a video recording—one in a hotel and another in a restaurant. Pick out key phrases needed for ordering a meal and checking into a hotel. Using the expressions, students work together to write their own dialogues. Writing the dialogue can be a whole-class activity in which the teacher or one of the students acts as a scribe, or it can be a pairwork activity. Students can also use discourse chains to compose dialogues.

Community Language Learning (CLL) transcripts are another source of student-generated dialogues. In this approach, students record what they want to say. They take turns practicing what they want to say with the assistance of the teacher. When they feel ready, they record their sentence, comment, or question. The teacher or another student writes out a transcript of the completed conversation. Diane Larsen-Freeman (2000) describes this approach in her book, *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*.

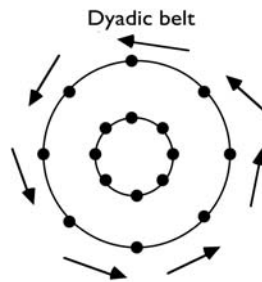
If you want students to develop a dialogue on a particular subject, guide them with a picture or topic. For a restaurant conversation, for example, distribute menus and ask them to order something. Recording the conversation and providing a transcript results in student-generated teaching material.

Two Configurations for Dialogue Practice

You can add variety and interest to dialogues for speaking practice by having students perform them in different physical configurations—for example, in two lines or in dyadic belt formation where they practice with different partners, as illustrated.



In this configuration, students stand opposite each other in two lines (line 1 and line 2) of equal numbers of students. Each student has two or three questions to ask the opposite student. Or, students may conduct open-ended questions that force use of the required pattern as follows. Once the pair has finished conversing, the students in Line 1 move opposite the next person down the line in Line 2 and repeat the question-answer pattern. The remaining person from Line 2 moves to the end of the line, so everyone has a chance to speak to everyone else in the class.



Alternatively, students stand in two concentric circles facing each other. Students in the inside circle face a partner on the outside. After practicing the dialogue with their partners, people on the outside all move counter-clockwise or clockwise and repeat the dialogue or dialogue variation with another partner from the inside circle. Do this several times.

When using either of these configurations, allow about 10 to 20 seconds per pair but not much longer because students are standing up. If you have a large class, you may want to make two or more dyadic chain paired lines.

An extension of dialogues are role plays, plays, sociodramas, and simulations. The rest of the chapter discusses the benefits, uses, types, and development of these as teaching materials.

Role Plays as Language Teaching Material

Description of Role Play

“Role play is a way of bringing situations from real life into the classroom” (Doff 1990, 232). It may also include plays, dramas, sociodramas, and simulation. Here we use the general term *role play* for all of these types of activities, but we will also discuss the specific definitions, benefits, and uses of plays, dramas and sociodramas, and simulation in this section.

In role play, students need to imagine a role, a context, or both and improvise a conversation. The context is usually determined, but students develop the dialogue as they proceed (Doff, 232). This differs from reading a dialogue aloud (except with Readers’ Theatre discussed later in this section). In this sense, the cue card variation to dialogues could also fit under the umbrella category of role plays.

Benefits of Role Play

Reasons for using role plays (including drama, sociodrama, plays, and simulations) in the language classroom include:

- They are fun.
- They help to prepare students for real-life communication by simulating reality—in situations, in unpredictability, and in the various roles individuals must play in their own lives. In this sense, they bridge the gap between the classroom and the world outside the classroom.
- They can be used for assessment and feedback purposes at the end of a text-book unit. They can be used to help you determine the degree of mastery attained.
- They can consolidate learning and allow students the opportunity to discover their own level of mastery over specific language content.
- By simulating reality, they allow beginning students and EFL students to feel that they are really using the language for a communicative purpose. This, in turn, contributes to students' confidence in their ability to use English.
- They heighten students' self-esteem and improve their ability to work cooperatively (Richard-Amato 1996).
- They allow students to experiment with language they have learned. Where students make up their own dialogue, they provide a special opportunity to go beyond what has been taught in class and to draw on the full range of their language competencies.
- They allow students to express who they are, their sense of humor, and their own personal communication style.
- They offer good listening practice.
- They provide an opportunity for practicing the rules of social behavior and the various sociolinguistic elements of communication (as determined by roles, ages, topic, or situation).
- They engage the learner physically. This involves the learner more fully and can be an aid in language retention.
- They can be liberating for many students who may enjoy expressing themselves through a role or a mask but may be inhibited about expressing themselves otherwise during the class. Students will sometimes take more risks and play with the language more when they are assuming a different identity. Role play can thus free students from the constraints of culture and expected behavior.
- They provide a context for understanding attitudes, expectations, and behaviors related to the target culture.
- They may be used as a stimulus to discussion and problem solving.
- They can be extensions of more controlled practice using dialogues. After practicing a dialogue, for example, you might develop role plays based on a parallel situation. A dialogue about buying a shirt could lead into a role play about buying a pair of shoes. Another way to use dialogue as the source of your role play is to use it to create cue cards (discussed earlier in this chapter) for the role play.

Developing Role Plays

In order to develop a role play, you must first have clear objectives on which to base your role play. The main bases for role plays are functions and grammar.

FUNCTIONS AS A BASIS FOR ROLE PLAYS

The most common situations for role plays are those in which the students may need to function in the target language (Richard-Amato, 182). As with dialogues, the situations used for role play should be within the realm of experience, possible experience, or knowledge of the students. The more familiar a situation is, the easier it will be for students to participate fully. Appropriate situations include topics that students see or in which they participate in their own lives. Examples include shopping, interacting at school, talking on the telephone, asking for directions, making appointments, and attending business meetings. Other possible situations for role play include fantasy situations from stories, television, or simulations and situations in which students prepare for a future event, for example, interviewing for a job in employment readiness programs.

GRAMMAR AS A BASIS FOR ROLE PLAYS

Another basis for role plays is for practicing structures. Because role plays are less controlled than drills and dialogues, it is important to choose situations and contexts in which the target structure occurs naturally. For example, courtroom role plays work well for less-controlled practice of past and past-progressive tense, and for question formation. Roles usually include the judge, the lawyers for the defense and the prosecution, clients, and witnesses. Each student is assigned a role and each is played out during the trial.

Remember that because role plays are less controlled practice activities, students may not use the target structures as much as you would like. There are usually several ways to successfully communicate meaning, so consider role play as an opportunity for students to practice a range of speaking and listening skills, rather than a single structure.

SITUATIONS AND STIMULI FOR ROLE PLAYS

Here are other sources for practicing grammar or functions.

- Courtroom situations can be based on newspaper articles of crimes and court cases, or situations you make up yourself, depending on your course, such as, prosecution of a shoplifter, burglar, computer crime, or racial discrimination.
- Meetings in various situations in which students take roles of various people. Meetings are useful, versatile, and easy to simulate. You can easily adapt them to problem-solving situations. They also work well for many other teaching functions, such as interrupting and bringing others into a conversation. For example, you can assign the role of mayor and council members, giving students a controversial topic for the meeting agenda. Or, you may select topics set out in a textbook you are using. Another example of a controversial topic for discussion is smoking bylaws. To prompt discussion, tell students that because they are paid well as council members and mayor, they are each expected, without exception, to express their views on the topic. For

business English students, meetings are a good context in which to practice negotiation and other cross-cultural communication skills.

- Interviews, TV talk shows, panel discussions, debates, and conversations in which students take roles of famous or infamous people past or present or even well-known characters from literature. Again, topics for discussion can be controversial or humorous. Consider Bill Gates and Alexander Graham Bell discussing communications technology. Or, as Richard-Amato suggests, Henry VIII being interviewed about divorce. These ideas can be used effectively to help mainstream ESL students with topics being covered in their academic subjects such as history, literature, and science.
- Pictures in which students play the roles of the people illustrated. Magazines and the newspaper are ideal current sources. For children you might prefer picture storybooks.
- TV shows such as sitcoms or soap operas in which students take the roles of familiar characters. Students mirror the styles of these characters, allowing them to “try on” an English-speaking behavior.
- Everyday situations such as greetings, small talk, shopping, dining, and family all lend themselves to role plays. Remember, however, that one of the strengths of role play is letting students play people other than themselves, freeing shy or intimidated students from their inhibitions.
- Written texts, including stories and fairy tales for children and various genres of literature for adolescents and adults. For example, students can act out a favorite story or play. Newspaper articles are another source of stories. A colleague used a story about a girl who fell into the river and was rescued by a passerby. The teacher found that this lent itself well to dramatic interpretation in the roles of the girl, the hero, paramedics, and observers.

In each of these situations, you can develop the role play or you can do so with your students. With some experience, students can write their own scripts for role plays.

Role Play for Children and Beginners

You can conduct role plays with all age groups and proficiency levels. While younger learners and beginners may need support, especially in early stages of participating in role plays, they will still benefit and become more independent and confident with practice. For example, use role play to teach beginning functions such as greetings, giving compliments, and common expressions.

Clark (1992), Richard-Amato, and others support the use of index cards for role play. The use of index cards with written cues or the complete role-play exchange will help students know what to say. At later stages, you may be able to leave blanks on the cue cards or just write the idea that each student should try to express. In *Index Card Games for ESL*, Raymond Clark describes this family tree activity. Each student is looking for family relations and receives a card with a description of his or her relationship with various others in the class who have similar cards. Students circulate, asking each other questions, until they find their relatives. Students tend to get very involved in this activity. In larger classes, you can add interest by developing the activity so that there are two families in the class. Students must find their own family members.

Puppets and toys are another way to motivate young learners and help them identify with a role. You can model the roles using the puppets or toys. You can also use flannel board figures or silhouettes on an overhead to model the roles. Richard-Amato adds that role play can be combined with a Total Physical Response approach, in which the teacher directs student movements during the plays.

Types of Roles

Role plays can range from highly structured, short exchanges, as in a restaurant, to those that are longer and more open ended. If you want a highly structured role play, you can write it up in situation cards similar to the cue cards described earlier. Here is an example of a situation card.

Instructions: *You are making an appointment with your professor. You have to do this through the college secretary.*

1. Greet the secretary.
2. Explain that you want to meet with your professor.
3. State why you want to meet (to discuss course content, to explain an absence, to ask about your exam grade).
4. List your available times.
5. Ask the secretary when the professor is available.
6. Ask if the secretary needs any other information.
8. Thank the secretary for her time.

You can go even further and fill in the actual lines, or portions of the lines, that students are to say if you think they need that degree of support at beginning levels. As they learn their parts, urge students to hand in the cue cards.

For adults, choose roles to play from everyday life—family members, store clerks, police officers, teachers, and social workers in various situations. However, students, particularly younger ones, may also enjoy taking on fantasy roles. One kindergarten teacher had to watch the story of “Little Red Riding Hood” role-played many times to satisfy all of her little wolves. Characters from television, from the students’ textbook, and from other books students are reading, are also suitable for role-play activities.

Situations with fewer roles than there are students are preferable over those with too many roles. Two students can usually perform the same role—for example, two police officers, two customers—and support each other in carrying out the role play. You can also divide the class into small groups for role plays that involve only three or four people, having each group perform the same role play. Generally, fewer roles mean more talking time for each student.

The Teacher’s Role in Role Play

In addition to being the motivator and possibly the writer and director of the role plays you present in your class, you should also be involved in the activity. Richard-Amato suggests that this gives you a reason for circulating in the group, providing prompts, helping where needed, and observing and assessing language use.

Preparing Students for Role Plays

Here are the steps in preparing students for their participation in role plays.

IDENTIFY AIMS AND OBJECTIVES FOR A ROLE PLAY

The aims and objectives for instructional role plays should be based on student needs, objectives, and your course curriculum. Students need to understand why they are participating in the role play and how it will contribute to their learning. For example, perhaps you are teaching a unit on housing. Our colleague, Donald Campbell, wanted his students to learn how to complain to the landlord about various problems with a rental unit. This was relevant to students, and they could immediately see the value in role-playing such situations. Student understanding will lead them to be more motivated and willing to see the role play to its natural end. It will also provide something to discuss after the role play ends.

IDENTIFY THE CONTEXT FOR A ROLE PLAY

Be sure to familiarize students with the environment in which the role play occurs. In the preceding example, you might have pictures of a meeting between a landlord and tenant, or you might have a phone conversation on an audio or video recording, perhaps one that you have created that provides an idea of the social environment, such as the formality of the interaction.

Simulate a sense of reality by using simple props such as a pen and notepad for a waitress, a hat for a police officer and signs. For a traffic accident role play, for example, our students used chairs as props to create city blocks and labelled the streets with local names.

Moving the chairs to form city blocks illustrates how you can use the classroom space to simulate an environment. You may need two rooms or a room and the hallway outside. If you have a small classroom, see if you can use the student lounge or another available space for simulations. You may find that the larger space has natural props such as a telephone and more furniture. Further, a change of place may help in mentally removing students from the classroom and your usual student-teacher roles.

LANGUAGE PRESENTATION FOR A ROLE PLAY

You will need to prepare students for the language they will use in the role play. Depending on proficiency levels, this may also include nonverbal and sociolinguistic aspects such as register. In our landlord-tenant example, our colleague presented vocabulary, including individual words and phrases related to making complaints, such as *My toilet/sink is plugged. My window/door/lock is broken. I have mice.* Some of the phrases for solutions from the landlord included, *Get a plumber. Try a plunger. I'll send a plumber/carpenter/exterminator.* He included wall charts, drawings of household problems, worksheets, jazz chants, charades, and other techniques to have students learn the language and practice fluency. He also modelled nonverbal aspects of the communication, explaining reasons for certain aspects of body language such as social distance.

Having students fill out a worksheet as individuals or in pairs is one effective

way to prepare them for the role play. Here is an example using the tenant-landlord example. Small groups complete the worksheet. You may want to correct the questions before asking the students to act out the role play together. Later, students will do a role play in pairs using their own script. This worksheet is for high-beginner or low-intermediate students participating in role play for the first time, so the teacher has provided a great deal of guidance and preparation.

Apartment Problems

Instructions: Read the following script silently. In your group, answer the questions that follow the script. Then each take a role and act out the script.

Script: *The tenants have asked the landlord to come to their apartment.
The tenants have some complaints to make to the landlord.
This is not the first time they have spoken to the landlord about their problems.*

Tenant 1: My sink is plugged.
Landlord: Have you tried to fix it with a plunger?
Tenant 1: Yes, but it does not help.
Landlord: You need a plumber.

Tenant 2: My wall is cracked.
Landlord: Have you tried to repair it with wall filler?
Tenant 2: No, I do not know how.
Landlord: You need a repair person.

Tenant 3: My apartment has mice.
Landlord: Have you tried to plug the holes?
Tenant 3: Yes, but it does not help.
Landlord: You need an exterminator.

Questions:

1. What is the script about?
2. What common expressions does the tenant use?
3. What common expressions does the landlord use?
4. Why do you think the tenants meet the landlord as a group?
5. Do you think this is a good apartment? Why?
6. Do you think this is a good landlord? Why?
7. Are the tenants polite to the landlord?
8. Is the landlord polite to the tenants?

Activity: In your group of four each take a role and read the script.

ROLE INFORMATION

It is important that you provide students with information about the various character roles they will play. It is usually advisable for you to assign each student a role if the role play involves several students. This is not necessary in dyad role plays.

Interview role plays allow the students to develop their characters as much or as little as they like. For role plays such as interviews, you may prefer students to play themselves. It is worth adding emotions or attitudes to the role play. For example, you may write on a role card: *you are a grumpy, young woman, tired from a long day's shopping*. Such instructions may add difficulty but can lead students to develop the role play and the character more fully as well as experiment with social and cultural factors in the character's interactions. Allowing student input into character development increases their investment in the role play. You can help by asking them questions about their character before beginning the role play. This warm-up activity can add much color to the role play. If you are using a commercial or existing story or text as the basis of a role play, the characters will probably already be developed for you.

Another way to have students provide their own information about roles is to ask them to draw illustrations or choose a picture to develop their roles. We know one teacher who took this form of role development to the limit. She related all language practice in the class to the role play, using characters developed by the students. On the first day of class, the students' homework assignment was to draw or make a collage of a character they would be for the rest of a four-week course. They then presented their characters in class along with a complete physical and character description. After learning some vocabulary related to movements, students described a sequence of physical movements made by their characters and acted them out. During subsequent classes, students were asked to perform various language functions in character, such as reporting an accident or giving opinions on an issue. Students sometimes objected to taking on their character's persona, considering it juvenile. However, they usually got carried away after stepping into character. This approach can turn the most banal oral practice activities into animated and amusing exchanges.

Keep role cards succinct and as simple as possible, but be prepared to help with new vocabulary. Make sure you plan reading, dictionary, and thinking time into role-play preparation. To facilitate student comprehension of role-play cards, you can have students work together to discuss the information on cards and help each other to get into the role. Or match each student with someone from a more advanced class who can help with the role cards. In an involved role play such as the murder mystery in *Advanced Communication Games* by Jill Hadfield (1997), you are advised to give students their character descriptions at least a day beforehand so they study and prepare the information at home.

MODELING THE ROLE PLAY

It is advisable that you model the role play in some way, especially if students have never before participated in this form of language practice. You can do this using a sequence of pictures and audio recordings, or model a scripted role play with

another student. As students become more familiar with role play, especially at advanced levels, less preparation is needed.

DOING THE ROLE PLAY

The most exciting stage is having the students actually perform the role play. Set a time limit on the role play. If it involves a solution to a problem, be sure that you have students write down or be prepared to report on the problem and solution they have chosen.

The tenant-landlord example is best done in pairs of students with you circulating to observe and provide assistance. Pairs should switch their roles halfway through the time allowed. If the role play includes more than student pairs, you should take on one of the roles. If pairs or small groups are participating in the role play, be sure to have a related or extension activity for those who finish early.

PROCESSING THE ROLE PLAY

You and your students should discuss the results of the role play. Students will be interested in hearing what went on in their peers' role plays, and you may want to extend the role play to include discussion about sociolinguistic and cultural aspects.

Depending upon your role play, it may start with pairs or groups of students presenting their role play to the rest of the class. Or it may start with students sharing problems and solutions. For example, in the tenant-landlord role play, a pair might say, *My problem was mice. My landlord suggested an exterminator.* Then, you might discuss other solutions with the students, for example, . . . *getting a cat.* or . . . *plugging the holes in the walls.* For advanced students, you might also discuss register, nonverbal behaviour, and protocols for making complaints to those who seem to have power.

It is also useful to get feedback from the students on how they liked the role play as a learning strategy and how it could be used or improved in future.

FOLLOW-UP

Your role-play activity need not end in class. You can have students write-up their role play as a narrative or a script. You can assign this as homework; to check understanding, give students a worksheet to fill in, based on the role play. Collect the homework to analyze any further work that needs to be done to achieve your objectives.

Drama and Sociodramas

Role play can be developed as a problem-solving tool or as a sociodrama to aid understanding of emotional expression, social interactions, and values of the target culture.

After discussing the situation, context and character roles, Richard-Amato suggests teaching the emotions and nonverbal communications involved in the play and how to express them. She suggests a number of ways to teach these to students such as modelling or drawing pictures of faces showing the expressions (see *Lexi-Carry* by Moran). By forming small groups as in charades, students can teach each

other facial expressions and nonverbal language that accompany various emotions. Have students watch the clip without the sound and guess what emotions the characters are expressing. Then replay the clip with the sound on.

Richard-Amato suggests using puppets with children to motivate student production of a drama or sociodrama. Students can also bring items from home and produce a drama that includes the use of all the items.

Another interesting idea is Readers' Theatre in which students take roles in a play and read them as if they were rehearsing for a performance. You may decide to use an actual short dramatic piece or a segment of a longer literary piece that students are studying in their literature class. Involve as many students as possible as characters and narrator. You may also involve students as directors, critics, stage managers, set designers, make-up artists, and lighting and sound experts. The key is to have students interact in a character role so that they can try on different social behaviors. It is extremely important that you, as teacher (and in this case production manager), create enthusiasm. This will motivate the students and encourage them to take the risks necessary to carry out their roles and have fun doing so. Eventually students write their own scripts.

Simulations

A distinction is sometimes made between simulation and role play. A simulation is a highly developed role play, almost a miniplay, that it is not scripted. The teacher sets up a simulated environment, such as the traffic accident set-up described earlier. The key is to structure the roles and action around a problem or series of problems.

A simulation is more involved than a single transactional episode, such as a customer returning a defective vacuum cleaner or making an appointment. In simulations, students may have to perform a variety of speeches and activities. For example, Irene Frankel and Cliff Meyers (1992) present a simulation of going to the doctor. This involves setting up a waiting room, a receptionist's desk, and an examination room. Students check in with the receptionist, spend time in the waiting area, and are called one by one to see the doctor who proceeds with an examination and diagnosis. You can even extend your simulations to include a "trip" to the pharmacy to fill a prescription. The role play, by contrast, might be just the conversation between the doctor and the patient.

There are a number of sources of simulation games and activities. Teresa Genzel and Martha Cummings (1986, 114–15) describe a shopping simulation and Helena Curtain and Carol Ann Dahlberg (2004) describe fantasy simulations for children in EFL situations. Such simulations can create a vivid connection between the classroom experience and the target culture. Here is one example:

Children are issued passports and airline tickets and prepare for a "trip" to Germany, Canada, Colombia, or any other destination appropriate. . . . The teacher prepares an "aircraft" with a masking tape outline on the floor . . . with chairs placed side by side, in twos or in fours, and labeled with letters and numbers, as in a real aircraft . . . there are . . . realia typically found in an airplane. Children are directed to show their

tickets and their passports to the flight attendant, to find their seats, to buckle their imaginary seatbelts . . . to look out their imaginary windows. . . . The children finally arrive at their destination and exclaim over large pictures of the city in which they have landed, as they are directed to look at and point to special landmarks they should note. . . . (Curtain and Dahlberg, 237).

Student Abilities and Scripted and Unscripted Role Play

Don't underestimate your students' abilities and motivation to write or produce (or both) an entire play. One five-week ESL summer immersion required each class to write and perform their own five-to-ten minute skit. Teachers involved themselves as little as possible in scripting and directing; their role was to allow students class time in which to prepare their skit by scheduling a brainstorming session, answering questions about dialogue, and providing encouragement. Every year the results were wonderful. Plays by beginners were equally entertaining and as well done as those by advanced classes.

You can divide students into groups to write and perform soap operas. To help them begin, provide written characters, conflicts, and locations on separate slips of paper that students pull out of a hat and use as elements in their soap opera. Experienced students can make up their scenarios; often, all they need is the suggestion that they begin their soap operas by choosing characters, a problem, and a place. In *Advanced Communication Games*, Hadfield (1997) provides lists of characters, conflicts and locations to facilitate this kind of role play.

WEB REFERENCES

- Bell, J., and M. Holt. "It's Your Right! Race, Colour and Ethnic Origin." In *It's Your Right! Student Manual*. Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada, 1988.
- Cassar, T. "Teaching Ideas for Upper Elementary Learners." *TESL Talk: ESL Literacy* 20, no. 1 (1990): 267–71.
- Clark, R. *Language Teaching Techniques*. Brattleboro, VT: Pro Lingua Associates, 1987.
- Clark, R. C., ed. *Index Card Games for ESL*. Brattleboro, VT: The Experiment Press, 1992.
- Curtain, H., and C. A. Dahlberg. *Languages and Children—Making the Match: New Language for Young Learners*. 3^d ed. Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon, 2004.
- Doff, A. *Teach English: A Training Course for Teachers*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press in Association with the British Council, 1990.
- Epstein, R. *EDCUR 391.3/TESL 31: TESL Theory and Skills Development: Course Notes*. Saskatoon, SK: Extension Division, University of Saskatchewan, 2001.
- Frankel, I., and C. Meyers. *CrossRoads I—Student Book*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.
- Genzel, R. B., and M. G. Cummings. *Culturally Speaking: A Conversation and Culture Text for Learners of English*. New York: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Graham, C. *Singing, Chanting, Telling Tales*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall Regents, 1992.
- Hadfield, J. *Advanced Communication Games*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1997.
- Hubbard, P. 1990. *A Training Course for TEFL*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.
- Hubbard, P., Jones, H., Thornton, B., and Wheeler, R. *A Training Course for TEFL*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Larsen-Freeman, D. *Techniques and Principles in Language Teaching*. 2^d ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Matthews, A., M. Spratt, and L. Dangerfield. *At the Chalkface: Practical Techniques in Language Teaching*. Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson, 1991.
- Moran, P. R. *LexiCarry: An Illustrated Vocabulary Builder for Second Languages*. Brattleboro, VT: Pro Lingua Associates, 2002.
- Omaggio, A. C. *Teaching Language in Context: Proficiency-Oriented Instruction*. Boston: Heinle & Heinle, 1986.
- Ormiston, M., R. Epstein, and D. Campbell. "Apartment Problems." In *English Language Teaching Materials: A Practical Guide*, eds. M. Ormiston and R. Epstein. Saskatoon, SK: University Extension Press, 2005.
- Richard-Amato, P. *Making It Happen: Interaction in the Second Language Classroom, from Practice to Theory*. White Plains, NY: Addison-Wesley, 1996.

- Slager, W. R. "Creating Context for Language Practice." In *Developing Communication Skills*, eds. E. Joiner and P. Westphal. Rowley, MA: Newbury House, 1976.
- Spratt, M. "The Practice Stage, Discourse Chains." In *At the Chalkface: Practical Techniques in Language Teaching*, eds. A. Matthews, M. Spratt, and L. Dangerfield. Walton-on-Thames, UK: Thomas Nelson, 1991.
- Wood, D. "Formulaic Language in Acquisition and Production: Implications for Teaching." *TESL Canada Journal* 20, no. 1 (2002): 1-15.