

Interactive Tasks

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Overview

In this module you will explore the following topics:

- communication and communicative activities
- activities versus tasks
- designing interactive tasks to promote communication
- tasks and language learning
- types of interactive tasks
- tasks for more advanced learners

If you were to ask students what they hope to learn from studying a second language (L2), most would mention wanting to speak or communicate in the L2. Similarly, one of the common goals of many language instructors is to help students improve their ability to communicate in the L2. Because of this shared goal of improving communication, instructors spend much time and effort trying to get their students to speak in class and interact with others. Most language textbooks contain activities that have students talk with a partner or in small groups about a thematic topic (such as family, school, travel, and so forth), often integrating a particular grammatical structure from the chapter or lesson. These activities are often marked with a special icon or title to let students and teachers know that these activities are communicative in some way or provide “communication practice” for students. For example, most introductory or intermediate language courses have a unit or a lesson on travel. Below is a sampling of communicative activities that come from recent editions of introductory college-level language textbooks. As you look at each activity, consider the following question: What makes the activity communicative?

- A. *Your last trip.* In pairs, describe the last trip you took, using the questions below.
1. Where did you go?

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2. With whom did you take the trip?
3. For how long were you there?

etc.

B. *Where have you traveled?* Interview a classmate using the following questions.

1. What trips have you taken in the last year?
2. How many times have you left the country?
3. How many times have you missed a flight?

etc.

C. *Interview.* Ask a classmate the questions below. Then, change roles.

1. What interesting trips have you taken? What activities did you do?
2. What kinds of things did you buy?
3. What is ecotourism?
4. What kind of tourism interests you the most? Explain.

D. *Your ideal vacation!* Imagine that you and three other classmates are family members that have won a one-week trip to any country in the world. The only problem is that you have to come to an agreement about the location.

Part 1. Each person should decide which is the ideal country for the trip and write the reasons why, using appropriate comparative and superlative forms.

Part 2. Take turns reading your opinions and try to convince your family members that your vacation idea is the best of all. Share your final decision with the class.

What these activities all have in common is that they require students to work together and to interact in the L2. In fact, communicative activities are often equated with group or pair work that involves the asking and answering of questions, as is the case in activities A through C. Yet there is often confusion surrounding the term “communicative” to describe classrooms and activities. This module begins, therefore, by highlighting some of the main points regarding the nature of communication and the term communicative. Next, we discuss particular kinds of activities that promote communicative exchanges among students and teachers. We also provide guidelines for developing these activities, along with examples and options for use in the classroom. In the last section, we propose how these activities can be used in more advanced courses in the target language, such as courses in culture, linguistics, literature, and film, to increase students’ opportunities to communicate.

Communication and Communicative Activities

For this module, we will adopt a standard working definition of communication often used in language teaching circles. Communication is the expression and interpretation of meaning in a given context. In addition, our focus is on interactive situations, such as the one shown in the following text message exchange:

MIKE: Wanna go running later?

CHUCK: Sure. What time?

MIKE: 7?

CHUCK: Ok! See you then.

In this exchange, Mike expresses some kind of meaning—his intention to go running and an invitation for Chuck to join him. At the same time, there is an expectation that Chuck will interpret that meaning and respond in some way, by either accepting or declining the invitation. What this brief exchange illustrates is that communication involves *both* the interpretation and expression of meaning. Mike's expression of meaning is specifically intended for Chuck, and Mike expects Chuck to interpret and then express information back to him. It also shows that interactive meaning exchange is not only oral, but can also be written, as in the case of text messaging, chat, and email exchanges.

Besides interpretation and expression of meaning, some communicative situations may involve negotiation of meaning. That is, what is expressed may not be interpreted properly at first, or there may be doubt as to how to interpret the expressed message, and the two interlocutors have to work it out. This is particularly common in written exchanges, such as email or instant messaging, in which contextual cues like gestures, intonation, and other extra-linguistic information are not present. Consider this possible response to Mike's invitation to go for a run:

MIKE: Wanna go running later?

CHUCK: Still sore.

MIKE: So light run? Or another day?

CHUCK: I better skip it today.

Negotiation of meaning occurs because Mike is not sure how to interpret Chuck's response that he is still sore. Does Chuck not plan on going? Or does he want to go, but it would have to be an easy, recovery run? In order to signal that Mike is not sure what Chuck wants to do, he follows up with a few questions to which Chuck responds and specifies his intended meaning—that he won't be running today.

In addition to the interpretation, expression, and possible negotiation of meaning that occurs in communicative interactions, the previous

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examples illustrate the purposeful nature of communication. Communication can serve a psycho-social purpose, which involves establishing or maintaining social relationships/roles and emotional bonds, as in “Hey. What’s up?” The intent of this utterance is not necessarily to obtain information, but it is used as a social formality in particular contexts. The other main purpose of communication is cognitive-informational, which entails obtaining information and putting it to use in some way, such as by verifying something or by performing another relevant task. This is the purpose exemplified in the example text message exchanges. The goal of Mike initiating his interaction with Chuck is to find out information that determines whether or not he will be running alone (verifying something), and then deciding when and where to run (performing a relevant task).

Reflection

Take another look at the sample text message exchanges. Can you come up with at least one other possible purpose of this interaction besides the two mentioned above? (Hint: could another purpose be for Mike to decide whether he actually goes running if Chuck doesn’t go?)

Keeping in mind the characteristics of communication discussed thus far, let’s take another look at the four activities presented at the beginning of this module. Do they involve the interpretation and expression of meaning? Is there a purpose to the interaction, either psycho-social or cognitive-informational? In the first three activities, students ask and answer questions about travel. Obviously, in order to answer the questions, the students must interpret the meaning of the questions and then express meaning in their answers. But what is the purpose of each activity? Clearly, the purpose is not psycho-social. Yet there is nothing about these activities that requires students to do anything with the information they exchange during these interviews. In fact, because students are not doing anything with the information their partners provide, it’s not clear that they need to work with a partner. They could just as easily work individually and write their answers and turn them in. The purpose, then, is also not cognitive-informational, and therefore not fully communicative. Instead, the purpose is language practice. In activity A, all of the questions involve the simple past. In activity B, all of the questions contain verbs in the present perfect. In activity C, the questions deal with travel vocabulary presented in the lesson. The real goal, then, of these activities is for students to work with a partner to practice using vocabulary and