

6 How can we vary the activities we do?

6.1 Introduction

Starter teachers need to build a bank of language learning activities to draw on in the classroom. More experienced teachers need to pick up new activities and vary old ones to keep themselves and their students motivated. In this chapter I'll start by describing and analysing an activity. I'll then show how the features of the activity can be changed to create many different variations to suit different circumstances. A bank of traditional activities follows, each one varied to suit radically different settings and teaching objectives. Some of the variations have been described in print elsewhere by teachers using a similarly creative approach to the use of conventional exercises.

6.2 Description of a learning activity

I'll now describe a useful activity for a language learning class.

A The alphabet blackboard game

Basic type of activity
A fast-paced 'energiser'.

Goals, reasons and beliefs

This activity can be used to wake a class up, help them to enjoy themselves, learn spelling, encourage use of the board and the area by the teacher's desk, and improve general knowledge.

Content or topic
General knowledge and spelling.

Context

This game can be played quite peacefully with cooperative adults. Think carefully though before trying it out with teenagers coming from a competitive classroom ethos, as team members may get angry and upset if their team loses. If you use it with students from a different cultural background to yours, be prepared to learn about their composers and cities, etc. and don't expect them to know all about yours.

Materials and medium

You'll need a large, wide board and one pen or piece of chalk for each team for writing up single words.

Organisation of people and furniture

You need a space in front of the blackboard. Students stand in two or three teams. The first person is near the board, but behind a line. All the other team members stand behind the leader. Teams can be formed by mixing language levels, friendship pairs and genders, but need to be of roughly equal size.

Steps

Lay out the blackboard like this:

	Team A	Team B
City		
Country		
Composer		
Colour		
Object (with four or more letters)		

THE ALPHABET BLACKBOARD GAME

After an explanation of the game and a 'dry run', call out a letter, e.g. 'B!' The first student from each team runs to the board and writes one city name starting with B on the board, e.g. Bombay or Bangkok. The student then hands the chalk to the next team member and goes to the back of the line. The person with the chalk goes to the board and writes up a country name starting with B, e.g. Brazil, and so on, with different team members, through all the items in the list. When one team has finished, the teacher shouts, 'Stop!' Everyone checks the spelling of the words on the board. The team that has the most correctly spelled words is the winner of that round. To make sure everyone has a chance to write up an item on the board, you'll need to play two or three rounds of the game.

Timing

This activity works well at any point in a lesson when energy levels are flagging.

Preparation time A minute to prepare the board.

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Setting up time Three or four minutes to explain the game and to have a dry run.

Activity time If you play this game once, you'll use about three to five minutes of class time.

Clear up time A few seconds to wipe the board and for people to get back to their seats. Then a minute or two for them to make a note of any spelling mistakes they made in the game.

Follow up time You could set homework for students to think of three more countries beginning with B and be able to point out on a map where they are.

Language

There are many different aspects of language we can consider here.

Teacher set up language Minimal as you could use a lot of mime and demonstration to set up the game.

Student interaction language Students will need to know how to say, for example, 'Quick!' or 'Pass me the chalk!' in the target language or else they'll be forced to use the mother tongue.

Focus language of the activity The spelling of names of cities, countries, etc.

The skills used are reading, writing and listening (and whispering so the other teams can't hear!). If we consider the proportion of accuracy and fluency work in the activity, we're driving for written accuracy and spoken fluency. Plenty of meaningful language is likely to be generated if students get into the spirit of the game.

Teacher role

You need to explain the game clearly, watch carefully, inject a sense of fun, and arbitrate with good humour.

Student role

Students need to be good team players to enjoy the game, but not be over-competitive or to worry about details such as exactly how many people there are in each team.

Cognitive processes

Students have to understand the game, retrieve items from memory by category and by letter, think fast, evaluate team performance, skip what they are stuck on and concentrate on what they can do instead.

Level of difficulty

The activity can be done from elementary level to upper-intermediate but will constitute a challenge for those who can't work under time pressure

6.3 Definition of the features of an activity

or aren't confident about spelling or writing in public, as well as those with very limited 'general' knowledge.

Correction policy

The correction happens within the teams while the game is being played and then between teams afterwards, with the teacher having the last say.

Other comments

Note the need to be prepared to add rules and penalties as you go along, as competitive groups will surely quibble over who's standing where and what happens if an item goes up in both teams' lists!

6.3 Definition of the features of an activity

I described the activity above under 15 headings. Since we can look at any activity from the perspective of these features, I'll say a little more about them.

Name and basic type of activity

Here we can include the standard names that every language teacher knows, such as 'Dictation', and also names that are personally coined for an activity, such as 'Ruth's hot seat idea'. As for the type of activity, you will have your own mental set of activity types, whether these are 'starters' and 'cool downs' or 'moral debates'.

Goals, reasons and beliefs

It's fundamental to consider what an activity is for, why you'd want to use it and what beliefs about people, learning, teaching and language it holds.

Content or topic

We need to know what an activity is about. Is its main theme 'cars' or 'joy' or 'the weather', for example?

Context

By context I mean the nation, culture, educational system, school and class ethos. This will make a huge difference to what you can do in class. If you work in a context, for example, where texts are expensive, considered extremely important, and where people like to learn them off by heart, then any activity involving altering or cutting up texts will go against everything students hold dear and will need to be introduced carefully and with a clear rationale.

Materials and medium

Here you consider what materials you will need for the activity, e.g. newspapers, graphs, flowcharts, tapes, and the main medium involved, e.g. pictures, numbers or texts.

Organisation of people and furniture

Another basic feature of an activity is the layout of the room and the way students are grouped for interaction, e.g. in plenary, milling around, in pairs or cooperative groups or working individually.

Steps

I mean here what actually happens in the classroom. How does the activity work? You may prefer to call this 'procedure'.

Timing

The time involved in an activity can be broken down into these stages:

Preparation time How much time you need to arrange the room or make copies, for example.

Setting up time How long it'll take you to explain to students what to do and get them started.

Activity time How much class time the activity takes up.

Clear up time The time it takes to get things back in order or to get ready to move onto the next phase of the lesson.

Follow up time The work done in the activity may well lead to other profitable areas that you can ask students to do later on or for homework.

Under 'Timing', you might also like to think of which point in the lesson an activity would fit especially well into.

Language

There are many different aspects of language to consider when analysing an activity:

Teacher set up language This is the language you need to get students settled profitably into their tasks.

Student interaction language This is the language that students need before, during and after the activity. I would include language such as 'Shall I go first?', 'What do we do next?', or 'Have we finished do you think?' If you don't teach this language, students will naturally use their mother tongue.

Focus language of the activity This is the target language that the activity is expressly designed to introduce or use.

You'll want to note which skills (reading, writing, speaking, listening) are used in the activity.

Under 'language' we can also note the proportion of accuracy and fluency work, and the amounts of meaningful language likely to be generated by the activity.

Teacher role

You may need to behave differently in different activities. For example, sometimes you should be very central and at other times keep more in the background. It's good to note what teacher roles and personality types suit an activity best. How does the teacher work with the students, the materials and the content to mediate it best for students?

Student role

Roles and personality type need to be considered here too. We also need to think about student familiarity with the activity type, and any group rivalries or personal anxieties that might be in play. When considering teacher and student roles it's useful to think about what outcomes the two parties expect since these are often different and unpredictable.

Cognitive processes

An essential consideration when looking at an activity is the mental effort it encourages. I mean, for example, summarising, comparing, contrasting, ranking, and so on.

Level of difficulty

I mean more here than just thinking 'This idea would probably be OK for elementary up to advanced level students.' An activity can be challenging for many reasons such as the grammar involved, the length, information density, vocabulary, speed, number of people involved, visual support, degree of precision required, number of steps, level of abstractness and many other reasons (see Williams and Burden 1997 p. 171). And once these factors are considered, there remains the choice of which level of challenge to introduce to students. Most current thinking suggests setting tasks at a level just beyond that at which learners are currently capable of functioning, and also teaching principles so that students can make the next step unassisted.

Correction policy

This feature entails considering who (students, teacher, the dictionary?) corrects what (intonation, gesture, choice of word, hesitancy?), when (immediately, after a few seconds, after a few minutes?) and how (by interrupting, holding up a card, writing a note, pointing at a chart?). There is also the 'zero option' where no one deliberately corrects anything overtly.

Other comments

You may well find that there are lots of other things you find worth noting about an activity that don't fit very easily under the headings above, e.g. whether an activity is multi-sensory or not or which type of intelligence is challenged or rewarded.

6.4 Changing the features of an activity

While you've been reading through the activities in the book, I'm sure that, apart from liking some immediately, disliking others and remembering similar and related activities of your own, you've probably been thinking about how you could vary some of the activities to suit your setting and purposes. This is a very natural reaction and is part of the design process that every responsive teacher goes through. We shape and reshape our materials, activities, lesson and course shapes to fit the design problem set by a particular student group, syllabus or course goal.

Continuing the gardening metaphor, we can alter our materials and activities a lot or a little to enhance our own style and setting, just as a gardener can add, take away or move single plants, rocks, paths or lawns to gain a better and better effect.

Let's look then at some of the changes we could make to the alphabet blackboard activity described above.

Content or topic

You can change the topics which are written down the left hand side of the board. You don't have to stick with 'City', 'Country', etc. If you've recently been working with students on, say, vocabulary connected with different rooms of the house, then you could write 'Kitchen', 'Lounge', etc. down the side of the board, thus encouraging students to remember and write up recently learned vocabulary.

Materials and medium

If you have a small, crowded classroom where it's difficult to have students moving around, you'll need to change the materials feature and let students do the game quietly and individually in their own notebooks. This will mean your neighbours don't complain about the noise but you'll need to think of a different way of checking that the spelling is correct as it won't be public any more.

Timing

If your students get stressed by fast games, you could allow longer for them to write their words down. This slower pace would work well especially if students work individually, and can no longer help each other in teams.

Steps

Perhaps you'd like to bring out some of your shyer, more imaginative students. If so, then instead of rewarding students for their speed in coming up with words, you could change the game to reward those who come up with an item that nobody else has thought of. Students could be encouraged to think for a while before recording their ideas.

Goals, reasons, beliefs

You could use a variation of the alphabet blackboard game for testing purposes rather than as an energiser. Warn the students in advance that they'll have a vocabulary test. Once students are settled in class, ask them to write their names at the top of a piece of paper and to hand in their lists for assessment at the end of the activity.

While playing with our activity, changing a feature here and there in order to address a particular design problem, other features will have changed apart from those deliberately tinkered with! Features such as the teacher set up language, the student interaction language, the correction policy and the degree of difficulty have all changed as we have adapted the materials or the goals, and so on.

As you can see then, an activity can be changed either slightly or greatly. Activities are plastic and malleable. This means that you can change most of the activities in this book to suit your group size, personality or curriculum. It also means that there's an infinite number of activities and variations on activities that could be mentioned in the activity bank which follows.

6.5 The activity bank

In this section I'll list some traditional activities used in language learning classrooms all over the world. Under each one I'll start with a description of the conventional way of running the activity. Next I'll consider ways of varying and improving the activity to achieve different ends. By changing some of the activity's features, you can make a new exercise with a radically different feel or purpose that works better in your classes.

A Reading a text and then answering questions on it

Conventional version

- 1 Elicit or teach a few words from the text.
- 2 Students read the text.

- 3 Students read comprehension questions and answer them individually.
- 4 Answers are checked in pairs or in plenary. You correct or explain as necessary.

Teaching objective 1

To encourage students to be more active and less dependent on you.

Variation

Change the teacher and student roles. So, instead of students being taught the pre-vocabulary, they go ahead and read the text. If they have any vocabulary problems, they consult dictionaries (thus changing the materials), ask each other or circle the words they don't know. They only ask the teacher for things they can't find out elsewhere.

Teaching objective 2

Perhaps your students hate comprehension questions but you still need to check that they have understood the text.

Variation 1

Change the steps and cognitive processes.

- 1 Ask students to read the text twice: once as themselves and then a second time through the eyes of someone in a relationship of some kind with the main character in the text, e.g. as if they were the parent, best friend, boss, lover, or even the dog of the main character.
- 2 When students read the text again from this new standpoint, they ask questions of and make comments to the main character, in role, as if in the stated relationship.

Variation 2

Change the materials and cognitive processes.

- 1 Prepare 20 or 30 questions on the text ranging from standard questions designed to retrieve basic information (on who did what, where, when and why) to questions designed to help students explore implications ('Why do you think X ...?' 'What will happen if ...?'), to questions that explore the mental images triggered by the text or recording ('In your mind's eye what colour was the ...?'), to questions dealing with personal experience ('Have you ever ...?') and the content itself ('What did you learn about ...?').
- 2 Students read the text.
- 3 Students read the questions. Once they've understood them, ask them to cross out the ones they don't want to answer. You can, if you wish, give a maximum number that they are allowed to cross out.

- 4 Students pair up, swap papers and ask each other the questions they have decided to tolerate.

Teaching objective 3

To encourage the students to do more talking.

Variation

Change the organisation of the people and furniture by asking students to work together in pairs. Then change the language by asking them to compose their own questions for other pairs.

Most of the teaching objectives and variations above can be applied to conventional listening comprehension exercises as well as to reading comprehension.

A Dictation

Conventional version

- 1 Choose a text students haven't seen before.
- 2 Read the whole text out loud once.
- 3 Read the text out loud again in small chunks or 'sense groups'.
- Students write the text down as you dictate it.
- 4 Students swap texts and mark them against a perfect copy or give in their dictations for you to mark.

Teaching objective

To encourage students to ask more questions in class and to even up the power relationship a little.

Variation

Change teacher and student roles. You become a 'robot' and the students are your controllers! It works like this:

- 1 Choose a text that students may have seen before but which is funny or interesting.
- 2 Elicit or teach words for punctuation such as 'full stop', 'comma', etc., and phrases such as 'Hang on!', 'What was the word after ...?', 'How do you spell?', 'What does that mean?', etc. If this language is new for students, write it up on the board and leave it displayed during the next few phases of the activity. This changes the language focus of the activity.
- 3 Warn students that you'll be reading at high speed. They must use the phrases on the board to stop you and get what they need to write the

text down correctly. Thus the goal changes from testing knowledge of sound and symbol correspondence to oral communication.

- 4 Start reading aloud at high speed. Students stop you. You answer questions, etc. until the whole text has been written down by students.
- 5 Pairs of students check with each other and ask you about anything they need in order to write the text perfectly.

A Repeating after the teacher

Conventional version

- 1 New language is met and the meaning explained.
- 2 Students listen carefully.
- 3 Say the new language perhaps once or twice slowly and then at natural speed and then ask students to repeat it.
- 4 Students repeat chorally, or in pairs or groups or individually.
- 5 Correct where necessary and continue this cycle until student utterances are standardised.

Teaching objective

To give the students fun and choice.

Variation

Change the steps and cognitive processes by doing the activity as above except that students are encouraged to do one of the following:

- Shut their eyes as they listen to your voice.
- Practise saying the new language mentally or sotto voce once or twice.
- Practise saying only those parts they really like the sound of. This changes the students' role.
- Practise saying it with varying volume, pitch or emotions.
- Practise saying it like a jazz chant, snapping fingers and exaggerating the rhythm.
- Mime actions as you speak.

A Copying from the blackboard

Conventional version

After being taught some new language, students copy sample sentences from the board.

Teaching objective

To involve students in making language choices so that they'll be able to use new language for their own purposes sooner.

Variation

Change the steps and thus the level of difficulty and the cognitive processes involved.

- 1 After working with some new language, write up all its parts on the board but in random order, as shown:

good	have	
	a	laugh
to		

NEW LANGUAGE

Or write up all the parts met so far and also some spare parts, as here.

laugh	I	like	to	read
		a	meal	
good		she	have	

NEW LANGUAGE AND SPARE PARTS

- 2 Encourage students to read the words out loud to make either the original pattern or an acceptable variation such as 'She likes to have a good read'.
- 3 Allow time for fine-tuning and questions.
- 4 Students write down their preferred versions while you go around checking.

A Reading a dialogue and then role playing it

Conventional version

- 1 Students meet a dialogue, perhaps in a textbook, read it and discuss it in plenary.
- 2 Students are paired up. Each takes the part of one character.
- 3 Students read aloud in character.
- 4 Students then swap roles and read again while you walk around listening, correcting and helping.

Teaching objective

To increase the number of meaningful exchanges between the students.

Variation

Change the topic and the steps which, in turn, will change the level of challenge and other features of the activity. For example, you and/or the students could choose a human relations problem. Some examples could be: feelings when you're not chosen for a team, feelings when you're not asked on an outing by a friend, the temptation to shoplift, relationships between a class and an over-strict or over-lax teacher.

- 1 Work with the class to generate a story line and to identify and flesh out some characters.
- 2 Discuss and note possible dialogue exchanges.
- 3 Pairs or small groups role play the situation.
- 4 Discuss the language, content and the empathy gained by students with the character they role played.
- 5 Students change roles and have the chance to gain empathy with a different character.
- 6 Have a final discussion about what can be done in situations of the type chosen. In this discussion students need to be 'out of role' and thus in a genuine problem-solving rather than adversarial mood.

A Checking homework around the class

Conventional version

The teacher calls on students one by one, round the class, to read out their answers to exercises set for homework.

Teaching objective 1

To prevent students from mentally 'switching off' until it's their turn to answer.

Variation

Change the steps and the students' roles. Call on the first student, but then after they've answered, ask them to nominate the next student, and so on, so that students are nominating each other. This way they'll have less idea of when their turn is coming and so will stay more involved.

Teaching objective 2

To encourage autonomous thinking and self-checking.

Variation

Change the organisation of people and the steps by asking students to work in groups to decide what the right answers were. They only ask you if they have doubts or disagreements.

A Filling in gaps in a cloze text

Conventional version

- 1 Choose a text and blank out one word in about every six so that the text is regularly gapped.
- 2 Students read the text all the way through once.
- 3 Students, alone or in pairs, try to fill in the gaps.
- 4 Students' answers are checked in plenary with discussion on why alternative choices are or aren't possible for reasons of collocation, word class, tense, etc.

Teaching objective

To give your students confidence in their ability to choose good collocations.

Variation

Change the materials, the goal of the exercise, the steps and the correction policy.

- 1 Choose a text and blank out words such as adjectives and adverbs which could be replaced by many other words of the same type. For example, in the phrase 'The woman looked around', the gap could be filled by: old, young, pleasant, peasant, rich, irritated, Spanish, laughing, etc.
- 2 Students read the whole text through.
- 3 Discuss the first gap so students can see that there are many possible alternatives for filling it.
- 4 Suggest that the students fill the gaps firstly to make the story as pleasant as possible and then a second time to make it as unpleasant as possible (or any other choices, e.g. formal/informal, vague/concrete).

- 5 Students try to fill the gaps accordingly, using dictionaries if they wish.
- 6 Students swap ideas in pairs.
- 7 Check students' attempts by discussing why some choices for filling the gaps are more or less appropriate than others, for reasons of collocation, word class, overall tone and register, etc.

A Student presentations

Conventional version

- 1 Each student is given time to prepare a topic and possibly write it down.
- 2 Each student talks for a pre-arranged amount of time to the rest of the class about their topic.

Teaching objective

To encourage students' concentration. Perhaps the quality of work that individual students have produced for this activity has been good, but you've noticed that while one student is presenting the others aren't really listening.

Variation

Change the steps and the students' and teacher's role so that students are more involved with the talks and are also graded on their participation throughout.

- 1 Each student writes their name at the top of a piece of paper and also the title of something they know about, e.g. 'Breeding rabbits' or 'playing hockey' or 'How to win on the world stock market'.
- 2 Each sheet of paper is now passed to a different student who writes questions they'd like to know the answers to, e.g. 'Why do you breed rabbits? Do you kill them? Do you have names for them?'
- 3 The papers are passed around until students have had a chance to write questions on most of the sheets of paper.
- 4 Students then get their own sheet of paper back with lots of questions on.
- 5 Students have time to prepare a talk on their chosen topic, incorporating answers to as many questions as they wish and in any order they feel is logical.
- 6 Students give their talks.
- 7 Class members listen and then ask further questions. You listen too, offering comments and asking questions, and also grading the talks themselves and the participation of the rest of the class in writing interesting questions and asking further questions after the talks.

A Memorising

Conventional version

- 1 Give students some time in class or for homework to memorise some new language, for example, a list of new words.
- 2 Test students on the material and give them marks.

Teaching objective

To encourage cooperation. Perhaps it's been decided that cooperation should be encouraged in class more than competition.

Variation

The goals have been changed, so you can change the organisation of people and the steps.

- 1 After students have met some new language, put them into mixed ability groups of equal numbers.
- 2 Give students time in class to memorise the new material. Tell them that when they are tested, their individual marks will be totalled and they will be given an average group mark. This is gained by dividing the total by the number of students in the group. Here's an example for one group:

Student A gets 10 correct
Student B gets 8 correct
Student C gets 6 correct
Student D gets 7 correct
Student E gets 3 correct

Group total = 34

Average score = 6.8

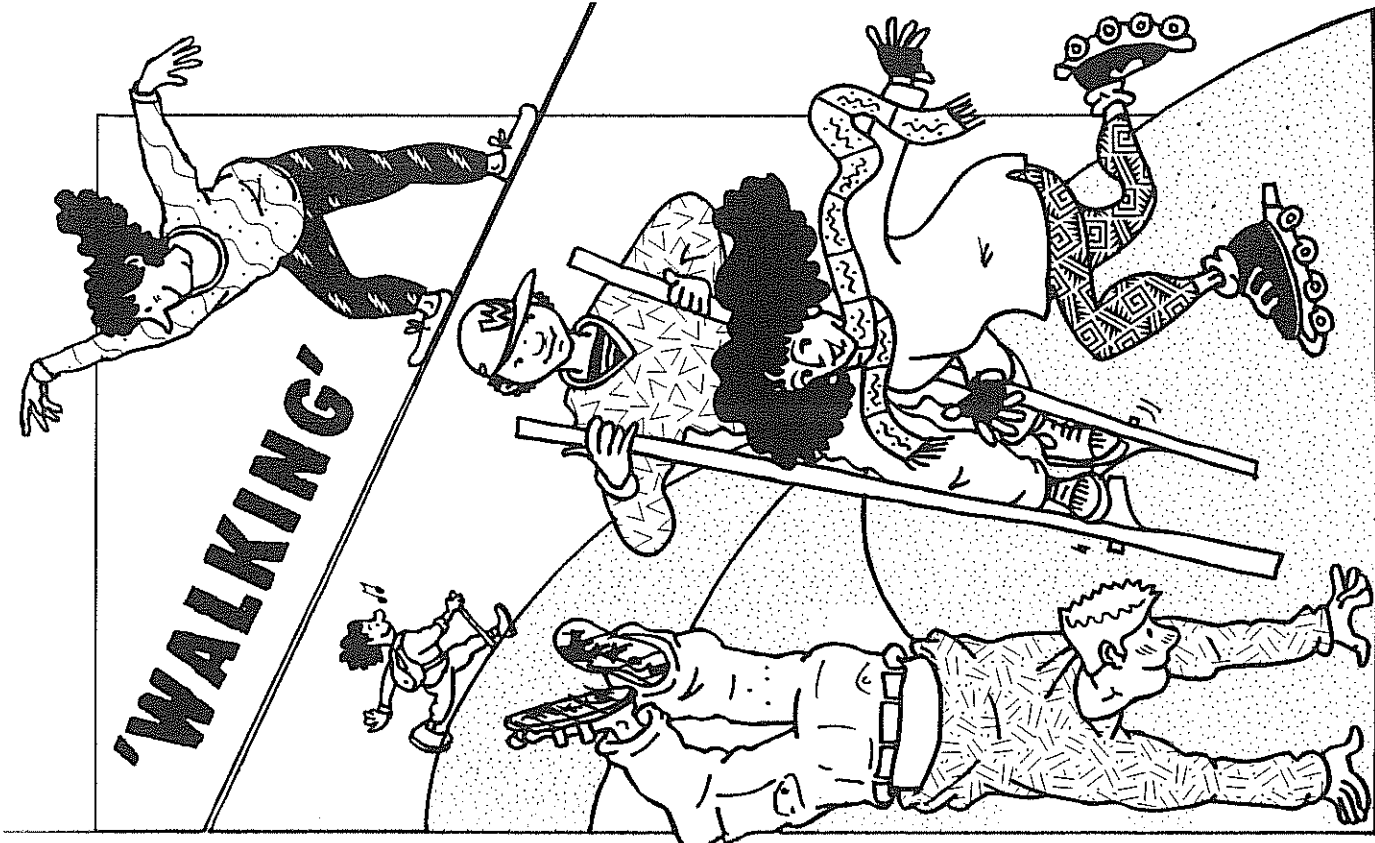
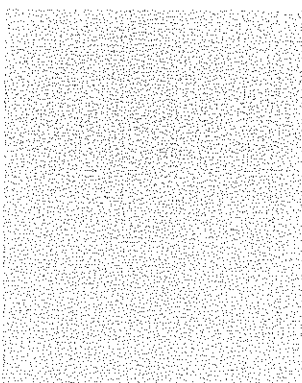
This average score is taken as the recorded score for each individual in the group. Thus Students A and E will both have the recorded score of 6.8. Once the students understand the scoring system, each group will work very hard to make sure that the scores of all group members are as high as possible.

- 3 The students are tested on the material and the scores are worked out as above.

6.6 Conclusion

If you've ever asked yourself 'What activities can I do in class?' I hope you'll feel, after reading this chapter, that you don't need to worry as

there's plenty you can do. You can start from just a bank of a few very traditional activities that you have learned, perhaps from your own days as a student of a foreign language. Then, once you've thought about your students, setting and personal style, you can change a feature or two. You'll choose to change the features of a particular activity for different reasons. Perhaps the activity you know only works in a large classroom or with elementary or very motivated students or takes too much preparation time. You'll want to change those features so that you can use a variation of the activity in your own setting and circumstances. Every time you change some features of an activity, the goals, cognitive processes and other features usually change too in dynamic and organic ways.



CHAPTER 6: HOW CAN WE VARY THE ACTIVITIES WE DO?