

# Learner Needs, Teacher Skills and Classroom Resources\*

Donn Byrne

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One of the key factors in language teaching is getting the *right* balance between teacher/learner input, whole class teaching/small group work, and teaching language as "form" or "function" (i.e. focussing on either accuracy or fluency). A model is proposed providing four main

types of language learning activity which takes these factors into account. Regardless of the amount of language control and teacher intervention, activities are communicative. Finally, the model is used to illustrate key roles in the classroom for both teachers and learners.

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In this paper I shall concern myself mainly with trying to show how we can get the right balance in our teaching between (a) teacher input and learner input, (b) teaching language as form and teaching language as function, and (c) whole class teaching and small group learning.

In the first instance my purpose will be to reassess the traditional role of the teacher and to show that both teachers and learners have something to contribute to language learning activities. Learners need to master both form and function. What, then, are the various kinds of activities that will help them to do this economically and effectively? Finally, although it is fashionable nowadays to disparage the "frontal" role of the teacher, whole class teaching can be very effective; moreover, in large classes, it is often unavoidable. Small group activities are not valuable *per se*.

The model for language learning activities in Figure 1 illustrates these areas. Viewed horizontally, the model shows, in sections A and C, activities where the teacher is in control, directing and participating; and, in sections B and D, activities where the learners, after appropriate briefing, are responsible for their own learning. Viewed vertically, the model shows, in sections A and B, areas where the purpose of the activities is mastery of the grammatical system, while in C and D, the goal is mastery of language function (or use) through self-expression.

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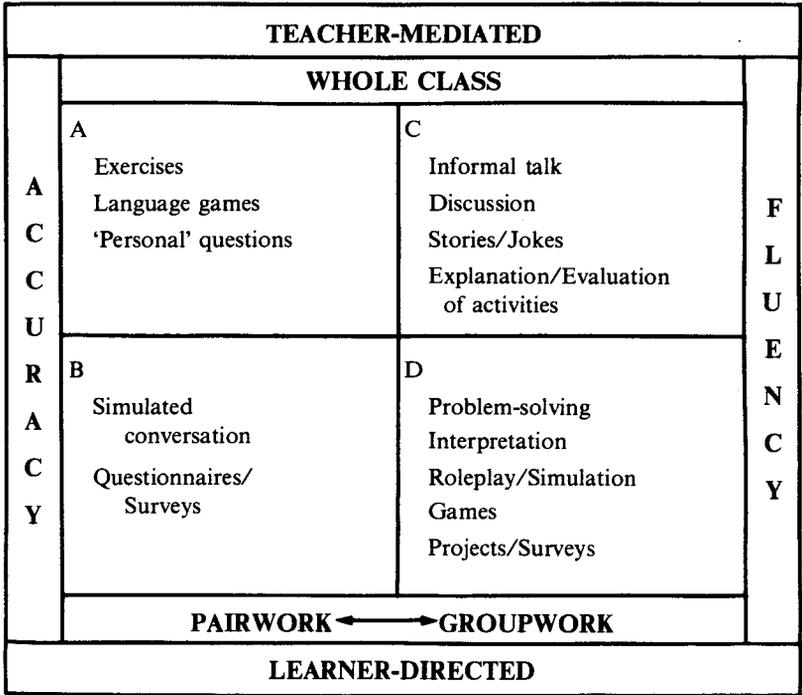


Figure 1. Language learning activities.

What the model does *not* specify is any kind of sequencing for these various kinds of activity. We may prefer to follow the traditional approach which takes us from accuracy exercises to fluency activities (i.e., correct model → practice → free expression/communication). Alternatively, we may prefer to start with fluency activities to discover what the learners need to be taught, then move back to correct model/practice before returning to fluency work again (Brumfit, 1978). However, why can't both approaches be integrated into the classroom? I should like to comment briefly on the various types of activities in each section.

**SECTION A: WHOLE CLASS TEACHER—MEDIATED ACTIVITIES**

**Exercises**

Little comment is needed here except to suggest that one should filter out the mindless/mechanical ones, if they occur in the textbook. They may provide accurate models—but will they ever foster accuracy?

## Language Games

If the learners need some form of repetition, it would be better to rely on the traditional type of language game for this, i.e., the ones that practise structure/lexis, but provide natural repetition because the focus is on the activity rather than the language itself (Rixon, 1981).

Many of these employ the “guessing” mechanism, trying to find out something real or invented. Figure 2 suggests just a few of these possibilities. Key features of these guessing activities are:

1. They use, quite unpretentiously, the “information gap” mechanism (Rixon, 1979);
2. They can be used at different levels of language ability;
3. They are easy to set up in the classroom (no special preparation or materials are needed).

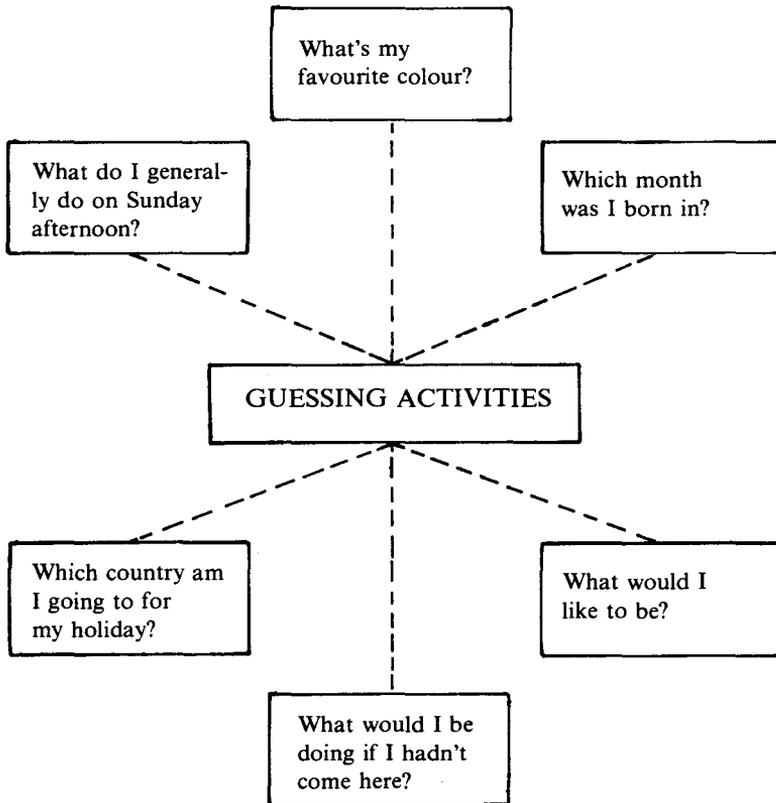


Figure 2. Types of questions involving guessing.

## “Personal” Questions

Even at an elementary level, teachers can ask and answer questions about activities, interests, health, etc., within the limits of language the students have learned.

## SECTION B: LEARNER-DIRECTED PAIRWORK ACTIVITIES

The focus here is still on accuracy, so much of the language will probably be modelled, but the aim of these activities is to get the maximum amount of practice through face-to-face interaction.

### Simulated Conversation

By this I mean the short (mini) dialogues found in many coursebooks which can be “gapped” so that the learners have to contribute something themselves, e.g.:

- S1: Like to come out tonight?  
S2: . . . . .  
S1: How about tomorrow, then?  
S2: . . . . .  
S1: OK. See you about . . . , then.  
S2: . . . . .

Alternatively, these dialogues can be “mapped” (e.g., Invite X to go out with you. Mention day/time. Decline invitation. Give reason, etc.).

The value of these conversational models is, of course, limited; they practise *speaking* rather than *talking*. However, they get the students used to working in pairs, and provide samples of conversational language which the students can adapt to their own needs.

### Questionnaires/Surveys

These are activities which provide much more genuine communication even though the language may be controlled. If the students are asked to write their own questions, all four skills can be integrated. The activity could be regarded as a preparation for interview skills which would be needed for project work. Two types of questionnaires are illustrated in Figure 3.

	FRIEND 1	FRIEND 2
FOOD	Anna	Nick
Cake	YES	
Cheese	NO	
Fish	NO	
Banana		

FIND SOMEONE WHO . . .	NAME
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- has never been abroad</li> <li>- likes Cat Stevens</li> <li>- was born in June</li> <li>- would like to go to the moon</li> </ul>	

Figure 3. Questionnaire types.

**SECTION C: TEACHER—MEDIATED WHOLE CLASS ACTIVITIES**

Learners need to interact with one another, but they can also usefully interact with the teacher who has the delicate task of providing flexible linguistic input and at the same time responding as a “person”. This is normally done when the teacher chats with the class and participates, as an equal, in discussions. The kind of listening practice which the students can get through this give-and-take type of activity can never be matched by recorded materials.

Narration (particularly story-telling) is also a much neglected type of activity. Similarly, the explanation and evaluation of activities is a very real use of language in the classroom setting because it is task-oriented.

## SECTION D: LEARNER-DIRECTED SMALL GROUP ACTIVITIES

There are a wide range of activities which are specifically concerned with the exercise and development of communication skills. Some key features are:

1. They use the "information" or "opinion" gap mechanism. Simply stated, either *I know: You don't know* or *I think X: You think Y*.
2. They are interactive: Learners talk face-to-face and frequently collaborate, rather than compete, on a task.
3. They are task-oriented: Language is used for a purpose.
4. The language used is authentic and unpredictable (Byrne & Rixon, 1979).

The range of activities here is virtually unlimited, but they may be categorised as follows:

1. *Problem-solving activities* e.g., items in a list (visual/verbal) to be classified, differences between two pictures/plans to be listed, similarities/connections between objects to be identified (Ur, 1979);
2. *Interpretation* e.g., interpreting pictures (of situations, faces), doodles, sounds, speech bubbles, headlines, snatches of dialogue (Byrne & Wright, 1974);
3. *Roleplay and simulation* e.g., activities ranging from interaction based on cuecards to full scale simulation/discussion/debate (Jones, 1979);
4. *Communication games* e.g., "Describe and Draw," "Describe and Note," "Complete It," as well as various kinds of board games (Byrne, 1980);
5. *Projects and surveys* e.g., activities taking students out of the classroom and involving a wide range of communication skills.

## CONCLUSION

I should like to suggest that the model in Figure 1 can also help us to understand other aspects of teacher/learner roles such as the contribution which both teachers and learners have to make to the classroom scene. It is suggested in Figure 4 that the teacher has something special to offer in the area of activities which focus on accuracy: namely, linguistic skills. On the other hand, with activities which are more concerned with fluency, teachers and learners should be viewed as partners. They both have relevant knowledge and experience to offer. Recognising this should foster a much healthier atmosphere in the classroom. The model can also

help us to identify a range of teacher roles, which vary according to the type of activity (see Figure 5).

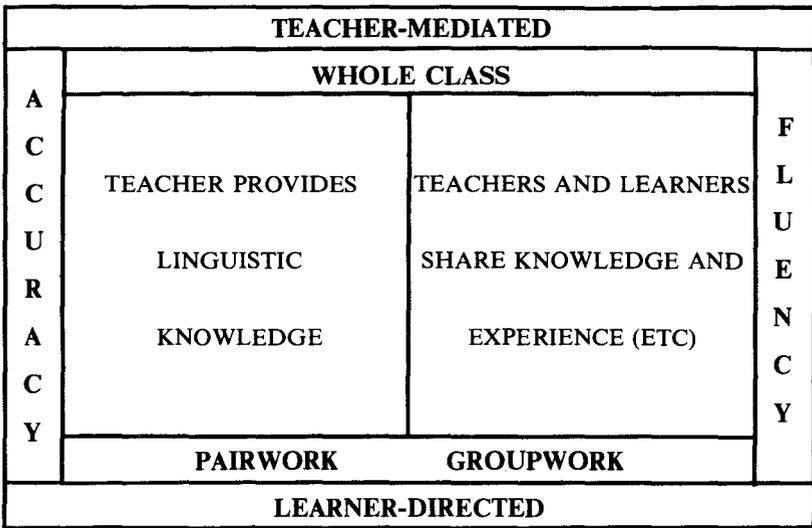


Figure 4. Contributions of teachers and students to language learning.

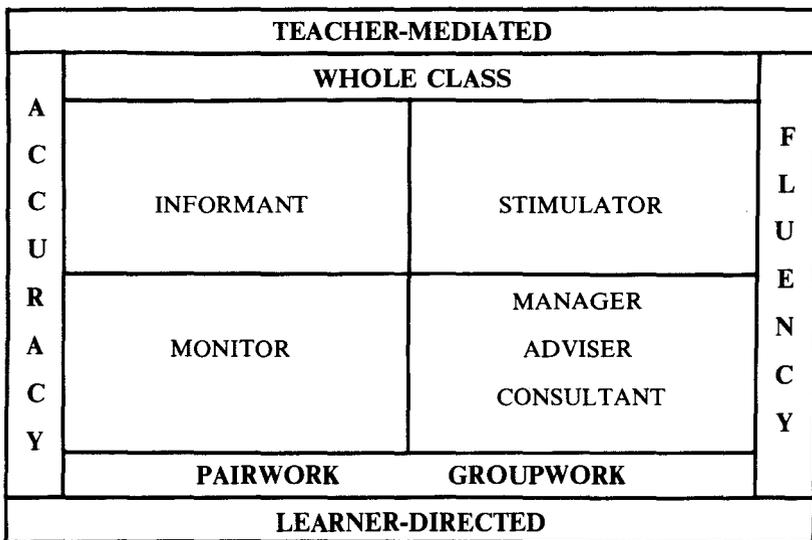


Figure 5. Teacher roles as a function of activity type.

Finally, I should like to relate my view of learner needs, teacher skills and classroom resources to a view of the classroom formulated by Earl Stevick (1976). Stevick's view is more optimistic than mine, but I think the range of classroom activities I have proposed would meet the recommendations that are put forward in his text. Succinctly stated, Stevick envisions the classroom as a place where students are:

- involved, contributing, satisfied;
- comfortable, relaxed;
- listening to, getting help from and correcting one another;

and where teachers are:

- providing direction;
- allowing, encouraging and requiring originality;
- relaxed and matter of fact, giving information, not criticising or blaming.

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## THE AUTHOR

Donn Byrne is a freelance teacher trainer and textbook writer. He has an M.A. in Classical Languages and Philosophy (Oxford) and a diploma in Linguistics (London). He has taught and trained teachers in England, Africa, India, South America, Italy and Canada, where he was Visiting Associate Professor in Applied Linguistics at Concordia University, Montreal from 1975 to 1976. He worked for the British Council from 1960 to 1977. His main publications are: *Teaching Oral English* (1976), *Teaching Writing Skills* (1979), *English Teaching Perspectives* (1980) and numerous course books and resource materials for use in the classroom.