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Universal Activities

Original and Adapted Recyclable Activities

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Methods and activities for more effective teaching with less preparation

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Introduction

I call these 30 activities universal because I've found that I can use them over and over again for a variety of grammar points and vocabulary. Essentially, they have become my "bag of tricks" and most of my lessons over the latter part of my fifteen years of teaching have included these activities or, in some cases, been made up solely of them. Realizing that having "universal activities" made my lesson planning so much easier, I began sharing these activities with my peers in a series of workshops. Over almost ten years of presenting the workshop "Universal Activities", the collection grew as teachers who attended suggested other activities and further adaptations of the ones I already had.

The activities themselves are either original or were taken from other sources and adapted to increase their universality. A good example is "Don't Say 'Yes' or 'No'", which comes from a well-known Penny Ur book called *Five Minute Activities*. The original activity has a student being fired a barrage of questions which they cannot answer with "yes" or "no". By simply stipulating that the students use a particular grammar structure in the questions, I created a fun form of controlled practice that can be used with numerous grammatical structures.

Another consideration in determining the universality of an activity was its potential to be adapted to all proficiency levels. Most, if not all, of the activities should lend themselves to use at all or most levels. The samples accompanying the activities in this collection are sometimes based on actual student contributions from my classes, which were mostly above pre-intermediate level. However, these samples are included merely to illustrate the wide range of application of the activity and are meant to stimulate teachers to extend the application even further.

When asked for my recipe for successful teaching, I've always summed it up with this statement: "Have fun and always leave the students with the feeling that they've learned something." This approach is reflected in the activities chosen for this collection. They are all very student-centred and have obvious linguistic aims. Because I ended up using these activities so frequently, I often saw ways of increasing their linguistic value or making them more fun for students. This is why I tried to make many of the activities cooperative or competitive, and ideally both. I've found that students are the most motivated when they can collaborate with partners in order to compete against their other classmates.

Activities

Folded Paper



Speaking

Vocabulary



Listening

Grammar



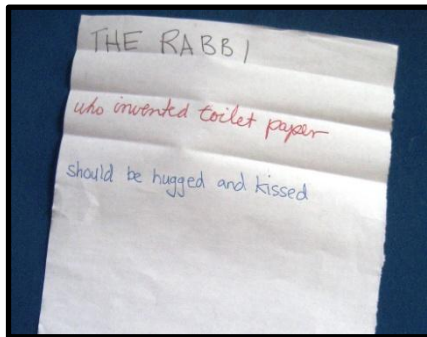
Reading

Pronunciation



Writing

Warmer/Icebreaker



This activity can be used to practice all sorts of lexical or grammatical structures. In addition, it will often involve specific vocabulary. Students are required to write a structure in stages on a sheet of paper, but each time they write a section of the structure, they have to fold the paper over so what they have written is not visible. After folding the paper, they pass it on to another student, who then continues to add to the structure.

Students enjoy this activity because, when they unfold the papers at the end, it often produces humorous results.

This activity can be used with many grammar points. As indicated above, it could also involve focussing on specific vocabulary depending on what is needed to fill the variable slots in the structure (see example below). Brainstorming some ideas for filling those slots is a good idea and students should be encouraged to use their creativity and provide their own ideas. Drawing attention to the variable slots in the structure not only raises awareness of the form but it gives students an idea of the type of items that can fill the slots and the overall generative value of the structure.

Transactional letters which are somewhat formulaic really lend themselves to this activity. Giving the students the lexical structure of the letter and pointing out where the variable information fits in actually gives them a model for creating a letter of this genre.

After you've done this activity in class, you can ask students to replace the variable, often silly parts, with serious information and what they should end up with is a basic but viable example of a letter of that genre.



In the workshop, *Universal Activities*, this activity was presented using a controversial building to demonstrate the construction of an identifying relative clause. That presentation is drawn on below to outline the procedure for the activity.

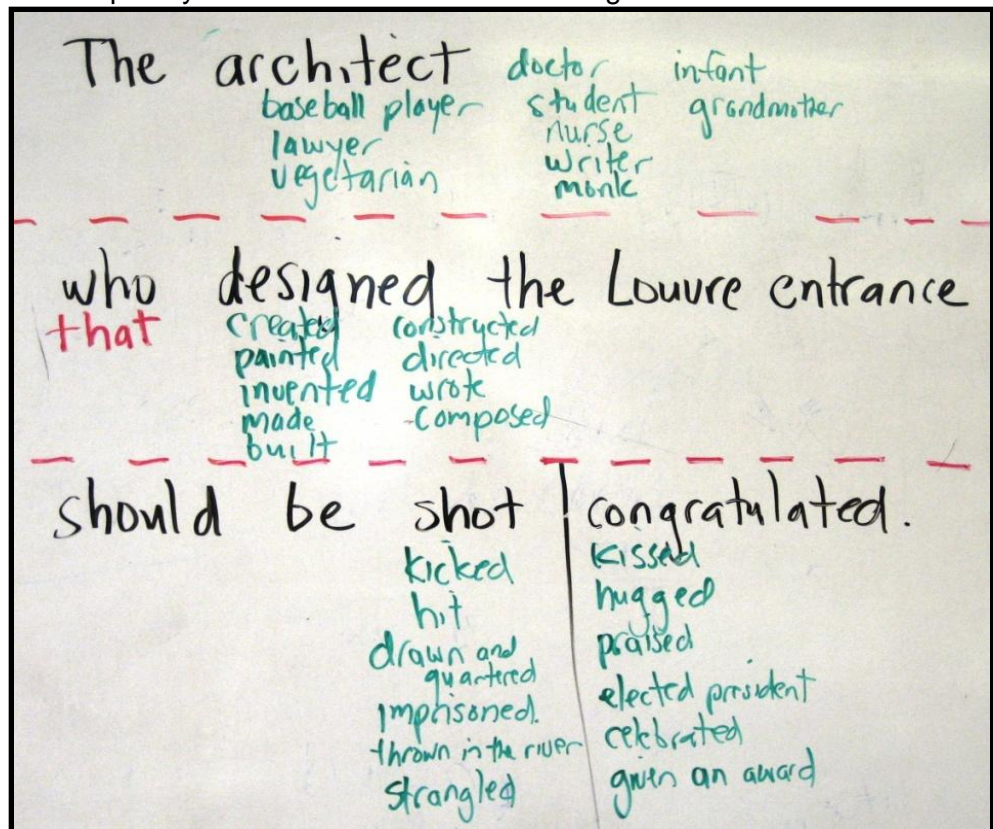
Materials

- half-sheets of paper
- board markers

Procedure

1. Write this line on the board: "The architect"
2. Leave some space below it, draw a dotted line and below it write this line: "who designed the Louvre entrance".
3. Leave some space, draw another dotted line on the board and write the following below it: "should be..."
4. Ask students who dislike the pyramid to finish the line "should be..." (e.g. "shot."). Write it on the board.
5. Ask students who like the pyramid to finish the line (e.g. "congratulated."). Write it on the board.
6. Clarify the structure as a relative clause and make sure the students understand why it is identifying and that "who" can be replaced with "that".
7. Elicit other general names for people besides architect and write them on the board around "architect", e.g. doctor, teacher, student, vegetarian, teenager (you could limit it to just professions).
8. Elicit other verbs for creating things and write them on the board under "designed", e.g. wrote, directed, painted, invented, sculpted, constructed, assembled, etc.
9. Elicit other rewards and write them on the board under "congratulated", e.g. kissed, hugged, praised, etc.
10. Elicit other punishments and write them on the board under "shot", e.g. punished, imprisoned, hit, scolded, etc.

At this point your board should look something like this:



11. Give each student a half-sheet of paper
12. Explain that the dotted lines on the board represent folds in the paper.
13. Tell the students to hold the paper vertically and write "The" + a *general name for a person* (e.g. "doctor") across the very top.
14. Tell students to fold the top of the paper over towards them so the line they wrote is no longer visible.
15. Tell students to pass the paper to the right and not to unfold the top.
16. Tell students to write "who" or "that" + *verb for creating + thing that was created* (e.g. "who invented the flush toilet") and fold it over and pass it to the right again.
17. Tell students to write "should be" + *reward or punishment* (e.g. "should be hugged") and fold it over again and pass it to the right.
18. Tell students they may unfold the paper and read the complete sentence.
19. Get some students to read them aloud and make corrections if needed.

Samples

Used to

Woody Allen (famous person 1)

and *Madonna* (famous person 2)

used to live in *New York* (place 1)

They got married and moved to *Siberia* (place 2)

They quickly got used to *the traffic jams* (noun)

but they couldn't get used to *eating pizza for breakfast*_(gerund)

Direct and indirect suggestions

The Queen

suggested to *Wayne Gretzky*

 "Let's have a party"

He/she suggested he/she jump off a bridge

Gerunds

Bill Clinton

accused *Bart Simpson of*

stealing potatoes. He/she denied doing that

and admitted *losing his/her underwear*

but was arrested for *vomiting.*

1st Conditionals

Mother Teresa **warned**

Tony Blair,

"If you don't stop *driving my car,*

I will eat your *French toast."*

3rd Conditionals

Monica Lewinsky

killed (strangled, poisoned, etc.) *Bill Gates*

If he/she hadn't died (been killed),

he/she would be *president* now

Passives

Andre Agassi

was bitten (licked, kissed, kicked, insulted, surprised, etc.)

by a dog/a dentist (animal or general name for a person)

that had been *kissed* (insulted, kicked, etc.)

by *Celine Dion*

Transactional letters

Letter of complaint

I am writing to complain about the *hamster*

that/which I bought in your *bakery*

11 years ago.

The problem is that it is *the wrong size*

and whenever I use it, it *makes a strange noise*

I am very (extremely, etc.) **unhappy** (unsatisfied, angry, furious, etc.) **and**

I would appreciate it if you *jumped out the window.*

Yours faithfully,
Joseph Stalin

Application letter

I would like to apply for the position of *dogcatcher*

which/that was advertised in *Playboy*

on *May 14, 1952.*

I am *4 years old and*

I have a degree in *drinking vodka* **from**

McDonald's University.

I have worked as a *drug dealer*

and I have been *cleaning toilets* **for** *10 years.*

I hope you will consider my application. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely,
Donald Duck

Guess Who



Speaking
Vocabulary



Listening
Grammar



Reading
Pronunciation



Writing
Warmer/Icebreaker

This guessing game is great for personalizing grammar or vocabulary. Students enjoy it as they get to guess which classmate wrote which set of statements about themselves. The students are required to use the target language in written answers to a set of questions about themselves. Their answers are then collected and redistributed to the students. The students then take turns reading aloud the statements on the paper they have and the rest of the class tries to guess whose paper it is. A good thing about this activity is that the teacher can assess the students' ability to use the target language in the written stage, if you want to monitor, or in the spoken stage afterwards, or both.

This activity could be made more communicative by giving the students a paper to record their partner's answers, which they would get by interviewing them. The only change is that during the guessing phase, you have to ask students who know whose paper is being read to not reveal it so others can still guess.

<p style="text-align: center;">Guess Who – My Plans</p> <p>tonight: <i>meeting a friend</i></p> <p>tomorrow: <i>going to sleep in</i></p> <p>next weekend: <i>going to</i></p> <p>next week:</p> <p>next summer:</p> <p>when I am older:</p>

Materials

- half-sheets of paper

Procedure

1. Decide on the grammar or vocabulary you want students to practice.
2. Give each student a half-sheet of paper. You can copy the guidelines for the questions on the papers beforehand or you can write the guidelines on the board or on an overhead transparency. Above is a sample for practicing future forms.
3. Each student fills out their answers. You can ask them at this stage to use the prescribed grammar or you could accept point form and have the grammar applied in the reporting stage.
4. Gather up the papers and redistribute them. Tell students not to worry if they get their own as nobody will know.
5. Each student reports what is on their paper. Example below:
 - “This person is meeting a friend tonight.”
 - “This person is going to sleep in tomorrow.”
 - “This person is going to go to a pub next weekend.”
 - “This person is going to take next week off.”
 - “This person thinks they will look for a job next summer.”
 - “This person won't get married until they are at least 30.”
6. As each student reports, make a note of errors to correct. Correct them after the student finishes.
7. When each student finishes reporting, the rest of the class tries to guess who it is.
8. When there are two students left, have them both report before the class guesses. This avoids making the answer obvious when only one student is left.

Samples Present perfect	I have never.... I have.... I haven't...
Present simple	I live at ... I work at... I eat...
Present continuous	At this time I am living ... At the present I am working... Right now I am thinking...
Past continuous	At 8:00 last night I was... At this time last week I was... At this time last year I was...
Gerunds	I avoid... I can't imagine... I enjoy...
2nd conditionals	If I were rich, I would... If I could change something about myself, I would... If I were president, I would...
Comparatives	I think ___ is more _____ than _____ I think ___ is _____er than _____ I think ___ is as _____ as _____
Frequency adverbs	I always... I never... I often...
Phrasal verbs	I look forward to... I often put off... I am saving up for...
Personality adjectives	I think _____ is intelligent. I think _____ is handsome. I think _____ is neurotic.
Adverbs of manner	I walk _____ly. I act _____ly. I speak _____ly.
Professions	I would like to be a _____ I used to be a _____ My mother is a _____