Unit 16 Practice activities and tasks for language and skills development

What are practice activities and tasks for language and skills development?

These are activities and tasks designed to give learners opportunities to practise and extend their use of language, such as new vocabulary, functional **exponents** or **grammatical structures**, or of the **subskills** of reading, listening, speaking or writing. There are many different kinds of activities and tasks with different names and different uses.

Key concepts

Here are two writing activities. Can you find three teaching differences between them?

Activity 1

Complete these sentences about yourself with *can* or *can't*.

1 I .... swim.
2 I .... speak Mandarin.
3 I .... play the guitar.
4 I .... use a computer.
5 I .... run very fast.

Activity 2

Write an invitation inviting your friends to your birthday party.
- Invite them.
- Tell them:
  the date
  the time
  the address of the party.

We can see that both these activities give learners an opportunity to use language, but in different ways.

Activity 1
- is a **controlled/restricted practice** activity because learners can only use certain items of language
- focuses on accurate use of language
- is a gap-fill exercise.

Activity 2
- is a **less controlled/freer practice** activity because the language the learners will use is not carefully limited or controlled
- focuses on communicating a message
- is a **task**.

The same kinds of differences can also be seen in other activities for speaking, writing and learning new language. **Drills** (guided repetitions), copying words or sentences, jazz chants, dictation and reading aloud are other examples of controlled practice activities. In freer activities the teacher or the materials do not limit the language that learners use. Examples of these are:

discussions; solving problems through exchanging ideas; sharing or comparing ideas, information or experiences; writing emails, stories, letters, invitations or compositions.

Here are six more activities. What skill/subskill/language do they focus on? What is the name of the type of activity?

1 Read the story. Then answer these questions:
  a How old is the girl?
  b Where does she live?
  c What is her friend's name?
	4 Listen to the tape, and in pairs fill in this form:
	  Girl's name: ....
	  Girl's address: ....
	  Name of girl's friend: ....

2 A Listen to the tape and choose the best answer:
  The children's school is:
  a near their house
  b near the shops
  c opposite the post office
  B Now listen again. Are these sentences true or false?
  a The school is new.
  b The classroom is big.
  c The library has many books.
	5 Work in pairs. Each of you should use one of these role cards.
	
	A Your friend has a problem. Give him/her the best advice you can.
	
	B You have a problem. You want to go to university, but you find studying very difficult. Ask your friend for advice.

3 Look at these pictures and then read the story. Put the pictures in the correct order. Write the correct number (1–6) under each picture.	6 Get into groups of four. Find out which food your friends like and dislike most. Ask: Which food do you like most? Which food do you dislike most?

Here are the answers to the questions above:

Activity	Skill/subskill/language	Type of activity
1	**Reading for specific information**	*Wh-* questions (questions beginning with question words: e.g. *which/what/how/when/why*) for comprehension
2	**Listening for specific information**	A **Multiple-choice questions** (an activity in which you choose the best answer from three or more possible answers) B **True/False questions** (an activity in which you decide whether statements are correct or incorrect)
3	**Reading for detail**	Ordering
4	**Listening for specific information**	Form filling
5	**Fluency** in speaking / freer practice of new language	**Role-play** (an activity in which you imagine that you are someone else in a specific situation)
6	**Accuracy** in speaking / controlled practice of new language	**Survey** (finding out the opinions of a group on one topic)

We can see that activities can differ in several ways: the skill or subskill they focus on; what type they are and what **interaction patterns** they use. The kinds of skills or the language they focus on and the interaction patterns they use are not fixed. So, for example, multiple-choice questions could be used for reading, listening or grammar activities and can be done individually, in pairs or in groups. Similarly, form-filling could be used for reading, listening, or grammar practice, and done individually, in pairs or in groups.

Activities 5 and 6 both involve learners talking to one another to exchange information they don't know. This means they are talking in order to communicate, not just to practise language. This kind of activity in which learners exchange information that only one of them has is called an **information gap** or a **communicative activity**.

An activity may focus on accuracy or communication depending on how it is introduced by the teacher or the materials. For example, the survey above is focused on accuracy because it limits the language that learners use to ask and answer two specific questions. If the instructions for the activity were 'Find out about your friends' likes and dislikes in food', this would not restrict learners' choice of language and the activity would focus on communication.

Key concepts and the language teaching classroom

- When selecting activities for practising language or the skills of speaking or writing, we need to decide whether to do a controlled practice or a freer practice activity, an activity that focuses on accuracy or on communication.
- When choosing activities for developing skills, we need to decide which skill or subskill to focus on.
- Lessons usually consist of a series of linked activities. There are several different ways of linking activities in lessons. These are just some of them:
  1 **PPP**: Presentation → controlled practice activities → freer practice activities
  2 **TBL**: Discussion → tasks → presentation → focus on form
  3 Skills-based lessons: **Warmer** and **lead-in** → comprehension tasks → post-task activities
     Example 1: A listening skills lesson
     Lead-in: discussing the topic of the listening and learning any important new vocabulary → Comprehension tasks: listening to the recorded conversation and answering multiple-choice gist questions about it → listening to the conversation again and completing a form with specific information → Post-task activities: brief discussion of the topic of the conversation.

     You can see that the comprehension activities (for listening or reading) start with focusing on more general levels of comprehension before moving on to subskills that require paying more detailed or specific attention to the text.
     Example 2: A topic-based lesson which develops several skills
     Lead-in: speaking about the topic and doing related language work → Tasks: listening to a recording about the topic → reading a text about the topic → Post-task activities: discussing the topic and/or focus on the language of the topic → writing a composition about the topic.

1 What do these activities aim to develop? Put them into the correct column.

Communication	Accuracy

A choral drilling of pronunciation
B role-play
C dictation
D discussions
E gap-fill exercise
F story writing
G copying words
H repeating new words
I describing pictures
J learning conversations by heart
K problem solving

2 Which skill(s) could these activities be used to develop?

A story completion
B form-filling
C information gap
D true/false questions
E role-play