

MOTIVATING AND ENHANCING LEARNING AT THE ADVANCED LEVEL

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Mind the Gap

As students progress in their professional competences and foreign languages acquisition, they increasingly require professional content and professionally oriented linguistic skills in their English classes. It takes a special effort on the part of the teacher to go beyond the textbook and relate learning activities to actual needs, which the students might not immediately see and appreciate. There are some teaching and learning techniques, which proved to be effective at lower foreign language level, but are hardly ever used systematically and consciously to enhance learning of senior students.

Some of these techniques are covered by the umbrella term “the information gap”, which was further subdivided into “the knowledge gap” “the experience gap” and “the reasoning gap” [Prabhu, 1992; Nunan, 1993].

— The classic *information gap* is usually used for sharing information (mainly, factual) to stimulate a dialogue for pair-work in small groups.

— *The opinion gap* is used to practice debates — for-and-against opinions exchange to get a balanced view.

— *The reasoning gap* — stimulates creating new information from the given through inference.

— *The experience gap* provides stimuli for training intercultural communication through the emphasis on different behavior patterns.

— As for *the knowledge gap*, methodologists suggest exploiting it in brainstorming and general knowledge quizzes.

Though rather overlapping in their meaning (esp. information / knowledge) these terms were used to denote certain kinds of activities, relying on a natural wish to learn the information you need to complete some task. Focused on school syllabi, the task-centred approach favoured activities limited in time, closely guided and with language cues supplied (brainstorming; role-play, where the participants are given different bits of information on cards, etc.).

So the “information gap” technique has been so extensively explored that its applications seem to be exhausted. But new generations of students, who want meaningful learning activities at all stages of their education, are motivated to communicate in a wider sense of the word and to communicate with their professional peers.

The analysis of the commercial courses, used at the university level, shows that the emphasis seems to be still on communication seen mainly as talking in class, which is perfect for young adults at the secondary and the beginning of the tertiary stage. But increasingly, as students get better command of the English language, they want to use it as a tool not only for communication, but of professional performance. So they expect the tasks, which would require them to learn something new and relevant apart from language units, so that they would be able to produce new discourse or act according to the knowledge they acquired.

Thus, learning or practising on new material the appropriate skills, which the student must regard as needed, becomes the stimulus for bridging the gap.

Reasoning this way, we can adapt the classification summed up above for our practical purposes as the “knowledge gap” which can+ be further subdivided into: 1) the factual information gap (covering also the experience gap); 2) the opinion gap; 3) the reasoning gap.

Combining these types of “gaps” helps to elicit all sorts of information from the text / discourse, in other words, to establish a meaningful dialogue (in a wide sense of the word within the framework of regarding thinking as “inner dialogue”) with a text /discourse. It is this activity that may help the student to establish cognitive dialogue with browsers while doing research. So, the meaning of communication acquires a new dimension, a cognitive one. Integrating personal experience with other information enhances the language retrieval and comparative-contrasting analytical skills. And all these activities are aimed at completing a task which should be relevant both for cross-cultural communication and for professional development of students of international relations, international law and economic relations.

The teaching unit suggested here is based on a text and audio/visual items about cultural issues. Social calendar events are the best choice because they are covered in various media.

The occasion here is Remembrance Day — very apposite in 2018, but can be used every autumn

term.

The final aim is to be able to describe and discuss the traditional events for remembering those who died for their country. (3—4 countries, e.g.: Britain, Belarus, Russia, the/a country of the second foreign language).

### **Step 1. Introduction.**

Bring in a poppy flower or its picture to the class immediately preceding Remembrance Sunday. Show the flower to the students and ask them what it symbolizes. This kickstarts a short brainstorming session. The content varies from year to year so some students are certain to know some new relevant features, like the Centenary of WWI.

#### *Teacher's Rationale*

A knowledge gap stimulates mental activity, memory and focused the students' attention. Introducing wide socio-cultural context.

### **Step 2. Pre-reading questions: creating information gap.**

When the students become aware that in Britain the poppy means the symbol of the memory of the people who died fighting for their country, the teacher offers them some questions (possibly, on the blackboard):

- Why was this particular symbol chosen?
- Why was this particular time/day chosen?
- What events take place on Remembrance Day?

Other questions might be set depending on the details you want to emphasize. Scanning reading stage: searching for particular information to fill the gaps.

The text which is offered at this stage should be fairly short and informative. If it is somewhat dated, it will provide some aspects for the information and experience gaps later.

#### *Teacher's Rationale*

Formulating the questions in a broad way focuses the students both on factual information and on the linguistic units used to express it. Both scanning and skimming reading skills are involved to fill the information gap.

### **Step 3. Reading.**

Read the text and find the answers to the pre-text questions.

#### Remembrance Day

November is usually a sombre month, so it seems a fitting time of year to remember the dead, particularly all those who died in World War I (1914—1918) and World War II (1939—1945).

The Armistice, the document which announced the end of fighting in World War I, was signed at 11 a.m. on 11th November, 1918. The time was chosen deliberately - the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month - and until the Second World War, Armistice Day was always remembered on 11th November. After the end of the second war the Sunday nearest to 11th November was chosen as Remembrance Sunday and on that day wreaths of poppies were laid on war memorials and in gardens of remembrance in most towns and villages in the country. The Queen lays a wreath at the foot of the huge national war memorial, called the Cenotaph, in Whitehall in London, and here, as in many other places, two minutes' silence is observed at 11 a.m. In this way the memory of the men and women who died in two world wars is honoured.

The red poppy was chosen for these wreaths and crosses because of a poem written early in the First World War by a Canadian doctor, John McCrae. He was working at a dressing station during violent fighting in the second battle of Ypres. The muddy fields of northern France and Belgium were scattered with dead and wounded men, but flowers still bloomed all round. They inspired Dr. McCrae to write a poem which was published in Punch in 1915. The blood-red poppy became a symbol of life given in war. If you cross northern France by train or car in summer, you can still see red poppies blowing in Flanders' fields.

After World War I so many servicemen were left crippled or shell-shocked that an organization was founded in 1921 to help them and their families. This was the British Legion, and its members decided to make and sell imitation Flanders poppies every year to raise funds. Nowadays, the Poppy Appeal ("Wear your poppy with pride") makes about three million pounds each year.

The Royal British Legion (as it is now called) also organizes an annual "Festival of Remembrance" in the Royal Albert Hall on the evening of Poppy Day in the presence of the Queen. You may have seen it on television. So if you buy a poppy in November, you are not only remembering those who died in past wars, but also your money is helping disabled servicemen and their families living today.

*Teaching Rationale*

Scanning/skimming reading of the text Remembrance Day (should take about 5—7 min.).

The students are asked to scan the text (on a handout) and find the information to answer the questions. So the knowledge about the event they have just acquired during the brainstorming session is supplemented by the facts the students find out for themselves while reading.

**Step 4. Discussion.**

This stage ensures the students sharing all information they acquired. Frontal discussion. Questions starting with the poppy as a symbol, continue with the origin and evolution of the tradition, current significance, details of the remembrance ritual. Then the teacher should suggest considering similar events in other countries and cultures. Involve all students in the discussion.

*Teacher's Rationale*

Establishing knowledge/experience gap-2 — comparison and contrast with the tradition in the area in Belarus, the neighbouring countries and the countries of the students second foreign language. Identifying a possible lack of knowledge about the evolution of the tradition, referring the students to their families' experience as a resource.

**Step 5. Home assignment.**

The students are required to watch the actual ceremony in Britain on Remembrance Day, listen to the commentary and read the news reports. The task is to supplement the knowledge about the event by the details by identifying new details and procedure variations in this year's marking Remembrance Day. Every year there is something different. This year of course, marking the Centenary of the Armistice Day, the parade, Prince of Wales laying the wreath on behalf of the Queen, the Duke of Edinburgh was absent. Students must be prepared to speak about the evolution of the event and its ceremonies in Britain, the one countries and in the neighbouring countries/ At this stage students are advised to interview their parents and grandparents so as to integrate reliable information into their reports.

The home assignment: 1) watch the event of the YouTube, 2) make notes of readitional details (listening for precision information), 3) new details and changes (reasoning, why), 4) identify differences and similarities between the traditions and events of various countries.

Alternatively, they might be asked to write an essay, or make a comparative presentation. Depending on their specialism, students may be given some more professional task, like writing a transcript of the TV commentary and translating it, writing a commentary for a live broadcast of celebrating the Victory Day in Belarus, compiling a table of similarities and differences in the ceremonies in different countries, production a tourist guide etc.

*Teacher's Rationale.*

Establishing knowledge/reasoning gap: only some details are explained in the news coverage. Other reasons for the changes must be inferred by the students themselves. Their reasoning is bound to be somewhat different and it would be an effective stimulus for the final discussion.

**Step 6. Presentation, Evaluation, Reflection.**

Students make their presentations which should be followed by the discussion of the changes and the reasons for them, with the teacher moderating the exchange of views. The teacher should supply, if possible, some controversial bit of information to encourage the discussion (for example in 2017 there was an article in the Guardian about the “cultural wars” connected with wearing a red poppy).

The summing up should make the students aware of what they have acquired un the way of knowledge (factual and linguistic), cognitive and communicative skills and general and professional competences. Students are recommended to include the presentation materials and the supporting information (transcripts, notes, glossaries) into the personal student's portfolios.

*Teacher's Rationale*

Independent individual work: interviewing the families, watching the ceremony, reading the news, reading about similar events in the students countries (discovery learning), practicing analytical skills, reasoning, summarizing according to the format set by the teacher.

Peer evaluation and self-evaluation are very important and so is the summing up for the students to get the sense of achievement. At the same time, evaluations skills are useful part of professional competences.

As you can see, this format of information gap activities relies on different resources including the Internet (re)search, various media and oral communication. It trains various skills and general and

professional competences, enables students to form an algorithm for learning the necessary information in a particular area (traditions, formal events, official procedures, ceremonies, rituals), learning and processing factual information from various sources (visual, audio, textual) and in different languages (so translation skills are also practised). Team/group and individual work are combined. A big part of the learning process is completed independently out of class.

The practical outcome: contribution to one's portfolio (reference materials).

#### **References**

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