

Circumlocution

THEME:	ANY
LANGUAGE:	ANY
STANDARDS:	COMMUNICATION CULTURES
	1.2 1.3 2.2

Time Frame:

This activity can be used as a warm-up for just a few minutes or can be used as a game for 20-30 minutes.

Materials Needed:

- Objects that may be found in both U.S. and target cultures, objects that may be unique to target culture, or names of concepts, organizations, etc. on pieces of paper
- Handout for listeners (provided)

Description of Task:

Set up:

This task can be used in the classroom like a game (like charades but with words instead of gestures). The primary objective is to encourage students to produce *output* (Swain, 1995), or to stretch themselves to take risks with the language to describe something whose name may be unknown. Focusing on output, according to Swain (1995), may help to push learners to process language more deeply (i.e., with more mental effort); this “stretching” of the learners’ interlanguage to meet communicative goals can help them to move beyond their current stage of language development.

Objects should be selected by the teacher (or students) ahead of time. The objects may be items that one might actually need to describe when the name is not known (e.g., classroom objects such as a thumbtack, a stapler, a file folder, a paper clip; cooking utensils such as spatula, blender, frying pan, etc.) or may be items that are unique to the target culture (e.g., a musical instrument, a game or game piece, Guatemalan “worry dolls,” a cooking utensil, etc.). Alternatively, instead of objects, names of concepts (such as democracy, love, intelligence, etc.) or organizations (e.g., Amnesty International, the Red Cross, etc.) can be written on pieces of paper. The

Level:

Intermediate-Mid

Purpose:

To produce comprehensible descriptions

Communicative Function(s):

Referential: Describing something

Language Structure(s):

Adjectives, descriptive phrases, present tense

Cultural Aspects:

Objects, concepts unique to the target culture may be a focus

Modalities:

Speaking

Listening

NOTES

objects or concepts selected may coincide with a particular theme that the class is studying (e.g., food, clothing, classroom basics, politics).

Presentation:

A student selects an object (or name of a concept/organization) from a collection gathered for the game which s/he must then describe to the class. The student may not use body language or drawing during the description. The teacher can decide whether to use this as a team effort or as an individual exercise. The group (or individual students) to whom the object is being described can draw it on a handout to demonstrate comprehension or they can provide the word or phrase in English (sample handout provided). Listeners should also be encouraged to jot down words or phrases the speaker used that contributed to their understanding. Later the target language vocabulary can be taught to the entire class.

Debriefing:

Ideally, the oral descriptions should be audio or video-recorded so that the teacher can use the recordings to draw students' attention to instances where other words or phrases might have been used to enhance the descriptions. If recording is not possible, students can refer to their reflections on the handout to recall the descriptions. The debriefing stage should help students to expand their vocabulary base and may focus on grammatical structures such as accurate use of the present tense, gender and number agreement of adjectives, etc.

Assessment:

No formal assessment is necessary. The teacher can assess the students' descriptions informally by assigning a plus for an excellent description, a check for an adequate description, and a minus for a description that was lacking or for evaluating the performance of a student who does not put forth effort. To assess the listeners' comprehension of the descriptions, the teacher can have students draw or write (in English) what they believe the speaker has described. These responses can be collected by the teacher and graded on the basis of the number correct and students' efforts to comprehend as indicated by their reflections (see handout).

Extensions:

Suggestions for adapting the task for various levels:

For beginning levels: Students can describe one of a limited number of objects that are shown to the class during the description. The class can identify the object being described.

For advanced levels: The activity can be made increasingly more sophisticated depending upon the objects/concepts to be described. It can also be made more difficult by prohibiting the use of certain words in descriptions (such as in the game “Taboo”). For example, to describe a stapler, words such as “staple,” “paper,” and “attach” might be prohibited. Students can and should be expected to produce more grammatically accurate descriptions.

Other extensions:

This game has many variations. Students can describe movies, books, etc. It may be particularly useful for reviewing specific material and vocabulary before an exam. Students can be assessed not only on their ability to use circumlocution but also on the accuracy of content of their descriptions. Specific grammatical forms can be emphasized and students can be expected to produce descriptions having accurate utterances.

Cultural extensions:

The objects/concepts described can be very reflective of the target culture. For example, students can be asked to describe historical figures, paintings, countries where the target language is spoken, celebrities, authors, artists, groups (such as “ETA,” the Basque terrorist group in Spain, or “Sendero Luminoso,” the “Shining Path” group in Peru), political parties, musical styles, etc.

References and Resources:

Adapted from a submission to the online Foreign Language Teaching Forum (flteach@ubvm.cc.buffalo.edu) made by Stephanie Campbell on March 25, 1996.

NOTES

Swain, M. (1995). Three functions of output in second language learning. In G. Cook & B. Seidlhofer (Eds.), *Principles and practice in applied linguistics: Studies in honour of H. G. Widdowson* (pp. 125-144). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Reflections:

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<i>Speaker Number</i>	<i>Reflection:</i> In this column, jot down the words and phrases (in the target language) used by the speaker that helped you guess the object/concept described.	<i>Comprehension:</i> In this column draw or write in English the object/concept described by the speaker.
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		

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