

# Communicating Success

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## Teaching Without Teaching

Recently, I have found myself in the rather curious position of being asked to "teach" in certain settings in ways that, on the surface at least, do not seem to be related to the fact that I am an EFL teacher. In fact, on occasion I have been told quite explicitly not to teach English, as the students are often studying on their own or, elsewhere, or just don't want another language lesson. At the same time, it has also been made clear that I should teach something.

One way I have found to meet the requirements of this kind of situation, is to give presentations on the nature of communication and the kinds of skills and attitudes that facilitate effective communication, and then set up exercises to practice those skills, and raise awareness of personal attitudes. There are a number of texts on some form of communication written specifically for ESL/EFL learners, but generally their business-orientation makes them somewhat unappealing to the general audiences I have been working with (O'Connor et al, 1992; Lees, 1983). Thus I have turned to a whole new source of material. These are books on communication written for native speakers (Gordon, 1980; Katz & Lawyer, 1994; McKenna, 1998; Lange & Jakubowski, 1976). It should be pointed out, that this kind of material is not explicitly intercultural--it is an introduction to how the more effective communicators in the West, communicate in English. However, even though a surprising amount does transcend cultural differences, I aim to help non-native EFL learners to better develop their abilities to communicate effectively in English in an international setting.

While these books may be a bit too difficult for the average EFL/ESL learner, they provide an excellent resource. The content is serious, but engaging as well. There are often exercises and role plays that can be adapted to demonstrate and clarify some learning objective. Although games and puzzles can sometimes seem a bit too childish for adult learners, in this context where they are employed to illustrate key ideas, they can provide some comic relief that also helps to underline an important point.

Lessons involving this kind of material often present learners with a three-fold challenge. First of all they have to think about what they will say--their opinions and ideas, secondly, they have to think about how to say those things in their foreign language--English, and thirdly, they have to practice a meta-cognitive exercise of observing how they actually interact and communicate with the others in the group or class.

## Rational and Intuitive Approaches

There are at least two different ways of looking at the use of communication skills--one rational and the other more intuitive (Yeatts and Hyten, 1998). The rational approach looks at overt behaviors in terms of verbal and non-verbal behavior. The verbal behavior involves the precise construction of sentences for speaking, such as assertive I-messages, and for active listening, such as reflecting and paraphrasing. In addition, the rational approach looks at various steps that can be walked through if the communication has a specific purpose such as problem-solving, conflict management and negotiation.

The intuitive approach looks at attitudes and awareness. The particular attitudes we hold in any given situation, and our awareness of our feelings and emotions are central to being able to guide communication toward any given goal. Two areas that can be explored here are trust and perception. A climate of trust enhances the communicative situation and conversely, an absence of trust can make it very difficult. How we perceive the world also affects the accuracy of our communication, and hence its effectiveness.

In terms of teaching, I have found it beneficial to look at both rational and intuitive approaches. The rational approach is generally more language based--looking at the paraphrasing involved in active-listening and the construction of assertive I-messages--and gives a lot of opportunity for role playing. The intuitive approach can be somewhat more interesting, however, and some books have specific exercises to raise awareness of faulty perceptual habits. And that can lead to a certain amount of "Eureka!" type insights that students seem to find very enjoyable and even entertaining.

In practice, it is impossible to focus on one approach to the exclusion of the other. Rational skills and formulas are based on certain values and are only effective when accompanied by corresponding attitudes--or else they become manipulative. And attitudes and awareness can only be expressed through certain behaviors. As background material for both approaches, Maslow's (1970) hierarchy of needs and the Johari Window (Luft, 1969) also provide interesting discussion points as well as substantial background for understanding key concepts behind motivation theory, need satisfaction and self-disclosure that are the underpinnings of both the rational and intuitive approaches to communication skills education. The concepts themselves are often novel, but are not particularly complex or difficult to understand and don't require a very sophisticated grasp of the language to be able to understand them or to put them into practice.

## Super-Squirrel

There are many examples I could give of the kinds of exercises that can be used, but I have chosen one that never seems to fail to create the kind of situation that illustrates a certain point about the nature of communication, and this is the Super-Squirrel exercise that Haney (1992) describes. I'll explain the exercise first, and then discuss its pedagogical purpose.

(I should point out here that I usually present and practice certain rational skills of sending and receiving messages before attempting this Super-Squirrel exercise, and an additional post-exercise activity is to have students reflect on how they used these rational skills in discussing the Super-Squirrel exercise.)

In a redwood forest in northern California stands a huge tree-15 feet in diameter at breast-high level. Clutched to the bark at this level is Super-Squirrel. (Why Super-Squirrel will be clear in a moment.) On the opposite side of the tree is a photographer who would like to take Super-Squirrel's picture, as portrayed in Figure 1.

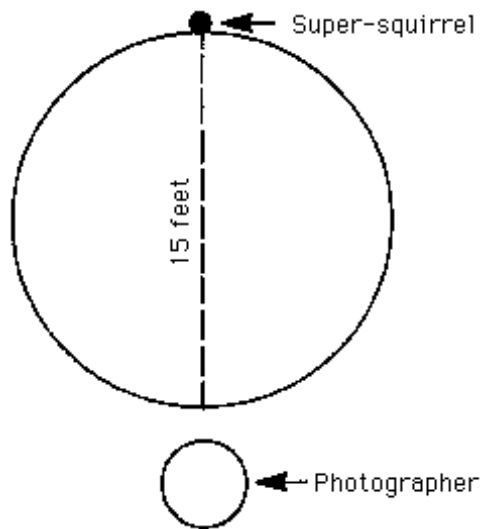


Figure 1

However, when the photographer walks to his right or his left, Super-Squirrel senses the photographer's movement and does the same. No matter how fast or quietly the man moves, Super-Squirrel is a match for him and manages to keep the tree's diameter between them. The photographer decides to back off a mile or two and sneak in from behind, but the uncanny squirrel detects this as well. Throwing a stick or stone to one side doesn't fool the squirrel either. Whatever, the photographer tries, Super-Squirrel keeps the tree's diameter between itself and the photographer at all times.

Given: There is no elevation change, such as tree-climbing or mountain climbing by either Super-Squirrel or the photographer.

The question: Can the photographer circle Super-Squirrel? The answer is either yes or no, or we can't say.

A lively debate is likely to ensue over this, with a lot of time spent trying to figure out just what the question really means. During this discussion, I make it clear that they must develop their own meaning, and I just make sure they don't go off on too a big a tangent from which they look like never returning. In the end, we usually end up with two different points of view, that can be represented by the two diagrams in Figure 2. According to one interpretation of the meaning of the verb "circle", obviously the photographer can, and

according to another, obviously he can't.

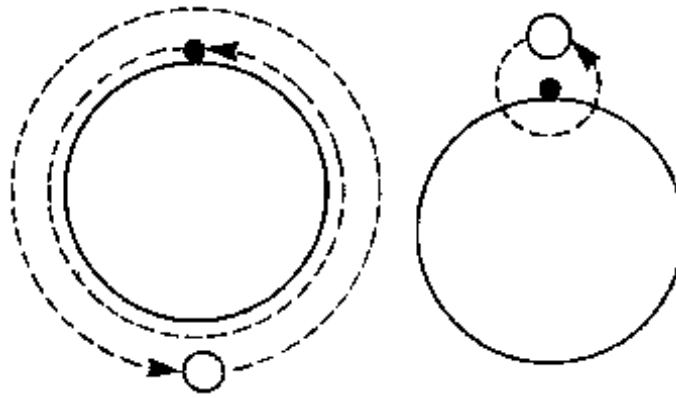


Figure 2

The point of this exercise, which should be pointed out once the issue has been fully understood, is that while a disagreement may sometimes look like a disagreement over facts, it could—as in this case—actually be a disagreement over the name given to those facts. As Haney (1992) puts it, "The issue is not physical but semantic" (p. 285). Words do not carry meaning apart from the interpretations we give them. While there is mostly consensus on the meaning of words, and hence people can communicate through them, it is not always the case. Problems arise when we assume others to interpret certain words in the same way we do, when in fact they don't.

## Pulling it all Together

In sum, this kind of exercise has many benefits for language learners. Having to understand the issue/problem and discuss it in English, provides a meaningful opportunity for learners to practice their English. These kinds of exercises can be very captivating as well as being instructive and often draw a high level of participation and motivation. But what distinguishes this kind of exercise from a parlor game, is the instructional value that is inherent in the problem, and which the problem can easily highlight in ways that will not easily be forgotten. Students are able to gain a heightened awareness of one aspect of their usual communicative style and can try putting that awareness into practice in additional exercises as well.

Although this is not ostensibly "teaching English," a certain amount of contextual instruction does take place. However, this kind of lesson deals with aspects of personal communication style that transcend language and can be applied in the students' native-language communication as well. The materials mentioned above, and many others like them, are generally targeted at native speakers and thus certain adjustments often have to be made to adapt them to the particular levels and needs of EFL/ESL students. However, in general they contain a number of viable exercises that can be incorporated into lessons designed to teach about communication and help students improve their own communication skills and techniques at the same time. While I discovered this material to meet the needs of less formal instruction, I have found that it fills a gap in more traditional EFL/ESL material, and I have started to use it in the more formal university setting as well. For example, I find that most of it is quite appropriate for the "Interpersonal Communication" course I have designed. The informal feedback I have had on this course has so far been that not only were the sessions themselves rewarding and valuable, but also, in some cases, they had some far reaching and presumably long-lasting effects on students' personal and professional relationships as well.

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The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IV, No. 11, November 1998

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