

Voices from the Field: Information Transfer Activity with a Comedic Twist

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Teaching Context

This activity was created for young adult ESL learners at the intermediate (CEFR B2) level.

Problem

Sometimes, language teaching activities contain a technique with potential to promote language learning but are boring to students. For example, an information transfer activity (Newton & Nation, 2021) involves language use in more than one skill and provides opportunities for students to interact with meaning for communicative purposes. Yet, it can be bleak and plain, thus losing students' interest (see Tomlinson & Matsuhara, 2017). In order to keep our students engaged, materials and activities must be meaningful and interesting to them.

Solution

An activity that challenges ESL students' ability through the simulation of relatable events—while unfolding in a lighthearted manner—will be memorable and engaging throughout. This activity uses information transfer by inviting students to listen to a description of a house and transfer that information into written form by filling out an empty floor plan, provided by the teacher (see Figure 1). The empty floor plan should be printed out and given to each student to fill in. The teacher should deliver the accompanying script in the voice of a property manager giving a walking tour to potential clients. This setup is similar to most information transfer activities of this kind in the classroom.

What sets this activity apart from others is the silly details sprinkled throughout the script. To make the mundane task of listening to descriptions of the house more engaging, humor was added to liven it up. At the same time, the use of humor can help determine the level of comprehension taking place in a given moment based on the learner's reactions. The teacher can gauge students' listening comprehension by listening for their chuckles when each silly detail comes up in the script.

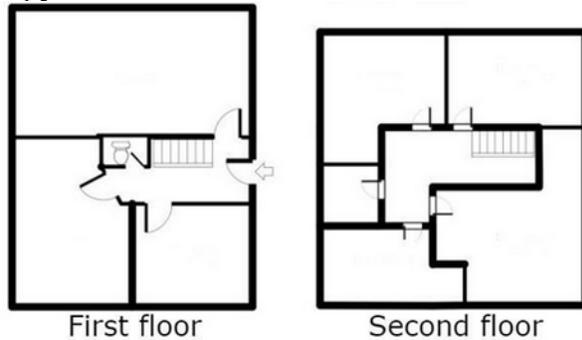


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Figure 1
Empty Floor Plan



Note. Adpated from tomnoble (2022).

SCRIPT:

(The narrator is a quirky property manager or real estate agent. Humorous parts have been italicized.)

The house I am about to show you has two floors.

We enter the First floor, where the arrow is pointing. This is the front door; watch your step!

After we enter the house, on the right is our first room on the First floor. This room is called the Lounge. There is only one door for this Lounge, so after we walk around the room, we must exit out the same door, which takes us back to the hallway. The first thing we should notice in the hallway is the staircase; *don't go up the stairs just yet; there's been reports of ghosts up there, and we are not ready to meet them.*

Across from the staircase, we have Bedroom number 1. This bedroom is small and *doesn't have any windows, so you'll most likely put your mother-in-law in here.* As we slowly back out of Bedroom number 1, we'll turn around, and you'll see the door to the First-floor half bathroom. That means there's no shower in there, so *I hope there is a shower upstairs, or else we're going to have an odor problem here.*

At the end of the hallway is the Kitchen, the heart of the home, *which we can hope your mother-in-law finds while she's visiting.* Let's leave the Kitchen and head up the stairs to the Second floor. *I've just received a notification that there isn't a ghost currently up there; it's just Bruno. He likes to play games, so we'll keep a lookout for him when we get up there.*

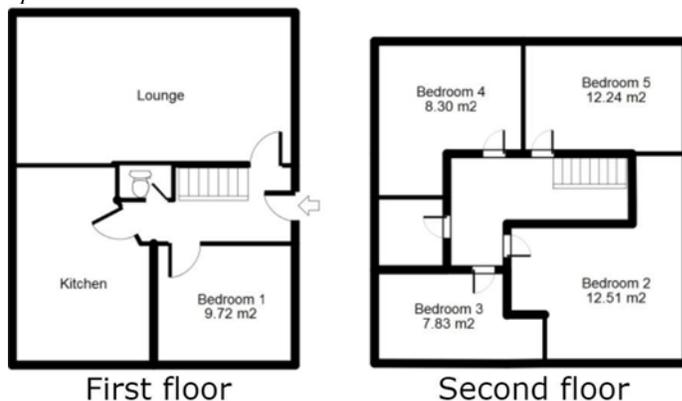
At the top of the staircase is another hallway with five doors. We are going to check and see what is behind each door, starting with the door closest to the stairs on our right-hand side. This is Bedroom number 5, and just like Bedroom number 1, it has no windows. Hmm, let's check what's behind the other four doors. To do this, we will go in a counterclockwise direction.

The next door opens to Bedroom number 4, which is a bit bigger than Bedroom number 1 but smaller than Bedroom number 5. We now have three doors left to open. Let's go back to the hallway and check the next door. Well, there isn't much in here because this is actually a linen closet. There's just a bunch of blankets, pillows and *LOOK OUT*, (*whew*) *sorry.... there's a cat sleeping in there. Purrrr! Bad kitty!*

With two doors left, let's see what else we find. Next to the linen closet is Bedroom number 3. This is the smallest of all the bedrooms, so we'll make this the guest room. *We don't want them to be too comfortable. As I always say, both guests and fish tend to sink after three days.* Finally, we have reached the last door and the largest room on the Second floor. This is Bedroom number 2, which we'll use as the master bedroom. *Dang, this one doesn't have windows either. Come to think of it, did any of you notice a bathroom up here WITH a shower? I need to talk to the architect of this place. Let's head back down the stairs and out the front door before Bruno catches us.*

At the end of the activity, the teacher can let students check their answers by projecting the labeled floor plan onto a screen or wall (see Figure 2). Students can either self-check their answers or, if needed, hand in their completed floor plans for credit.

Figure 2
Completed Floor Plan



Note. Adapted from tomnoble (2022).

Additionally, this activity could be continued as a speaking exercise. Students could be asked to take turns reconstituting the text of the home tour. In doing this, the teacher creates an

opportunity for authentic language production as students mimic the original story (which reflects their understanding) or act out the tour with their own humor inserted.

Conclusion

As a teacher, I believe it is important to keep the learners focused and engaged while maintaining a positive learning environment. When teachers are willing to work outside of the box rather than staying inside of it, the students will be stimulated throughout the lesson. By inserting humor, I can know in real-time if the students are engaged based on their reactions. This moment of comprehension also boosts my students' motivation and morale. For the struggling students, conversations begin as they, too, would like to know what was so funny. Here, an authentic language exchange occurs between the students as the joke is retold or explained. By allowing these exchanges to take place, the supportive students contribute to the positive learning environment.

A balance of humor within the lesson is required so that the jokes do not distract from the main focus. Humor does not work for everyone. Additionally, students generally know when a joke is not coming from a “natural” place; therefore, forcing humor in the lesson just for the sake of it being there will have the opposite effect. Humor, when done properly, contributes to minimizing the wall or distance between teachers and students, which can make the classroom conducive to learning.

References

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About the author

Jared Smith is an MA TESOL candidate and retired US Navy Chief. He holds a Bachelor's in Middle Eastern Studies – Arabic language from Excelsior College. He is currently teaching ESL in Hawaii and aims to broaden his classroom activities with additional task-based activities (instruction).