A Practical Guide to Actions in the Classroom

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Abstract

This article presents a variety of action-based activities with imperatives (called "commands") that can be used to provide a change of pace, to supplement a lesson, and to aid in the development of the students' competence in listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary. I first briefly contextualize the use of actions as an instructional procedure and set forth my reasons for using it. I then give suggestions for using and working with (1) simple commands (a basic procedure; commands for the whole class; student-to-student commands; commands with props; commands with cutouts); (2) board commands (writing and drawing commands); and (3) commands to expand the students' listening comprehension (chained commands; structurally complex commands; novel commands; impossible commands). This is followed by a brief presentation of activities to develop speaking (role reversal; pair work; describing; remembering) and grammar (act and say; sentence combining). Hypotheses for the long-term retention of vocabulary learned through actions are presented. The article ends by asserting that within a teacher's repertoire of effective strategies, procedures, and techniques there is a place for action-based activities.

Resumen

Este artículo presenta una variedad de actividades basadas en acciones realizadas por los estudiantes en respuesta a "órdenes" en la forma de imperativos) hablados por el profesor. Estas actividades pueden ser usadas para proporcionar un cambio de ritmo, complementar una lección, y ayudar en el desarrollo de la competencia de los estudiantes en la escucha, habla, gramática y vocabulario. Primero contextualizo el uso de acciones en el aula y establezco mis razones para usarlos. En seguida doy sugerencias para trabajar con (1) órdenes simples (un procedimiento básico; órdenes para toda la clase; órdenes de estudiante a estudiante; órdenes con objetos; órdenes con figuras recortadas de cartulina); (2) órdenes para el pizarrón/la pizarra blanca (órdenes para escribir y dibujar); y (3) órdenes para ampliar la comprensión del alumnado (órdenes más largas; órdenes estructuralmente complejas; órdenes novedosas; órdenes imposibles). Esto es seguido por una breve presentación de actividades para desarrollar (1) el habla (inversión de papeles; actividades en pares; describiendo y recordando acciones) y (2) la gramática (actuando y hablando; combinando oraciones). Se presentan algunas hipótesis para la retención a largo plazo del vocabulario aprendido a través de acciones. El artículo finaliza afirmando que profesores tienen un repertorio personal de procedimientos y técnicas eficaces dentro del cual hay un lugar para actividades basadas en acciones.

The idea of teaching language through actions is not new. In 1880 the Frenchman François Gouin published *L'art d'enseigner et d'étudier les langues* in which the learners acted out and commented on a series of related actions such as *I walk towards the door, I get to the door, I stop at the door* (Titone, 1968, p. 35). Forty-five years later, in 1925, the eminent English methodologist Harold E. Palmer, together with his daughter Dorothée, published *English through Actions.* In the late 1960s, James Asher, a professor of psychology at San José State University, began researching the potential of actions as an instructional strategy. As a result of his numerous publications in academic journals (for a summary and discussion, see Asher, 1981; 2009), the use of actions as a procedure/technique gained prominence, became more widely disseminated, and was incorporated into a teaching approach known as Total Physical Response (TPR). (For information on this approach, see Asher, 2009; Larsen-Freeman & Anderson, 2011; Richards & Rogers, 2001).

This article presents a variety of action-based activities that can be used to provide a change of pace, to supplement a lesson, and to aid in the development of the students' competence in listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary. The activities are based

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on imperatives (called "commands"), which are used to direct students to perform actions (e.g., *point to the ceiling*). Most of the activities presented can be done within a space of five to ten minutes.

Why Use Actions

In my work in Brazil using TPR to teach English to beginners (adults and preteens), I have found good reasons to employ actions as an instructional procedure, some of which are as follows:

- The use of real objects and actions in the classroom makes the language more concrete and easier to grasp, reducing the need for translation;
- As the students mentally process what they hear without recourse to translation, they learn to think in English;
- The use of the muscular–motor system aids in producing long-term retention;
- Command-action activities engender a fun, game-like classroom atmosphere which is conducive to language learning and acquisition.

Simple Commands

While some practitioners feel that action-based activities can be used at all proficiency levels (Seely & Romijn, 2001), I have found this procedure to be more appropriate for beginners and false beginners, as well as for lower-intermediate and (to a lesser degree) intermediate level learners. With some minor adaptations, these activities can be used at all age levels. Children and preteens perform actions enthusiastically. With teens and adults, depending on the group, you may wish to delay (or even avoid) some actions, e.g., running or jumping. However, my students in the first level English course at the Federal University of Amazonas (occasionally including middle-aged students) always readily and willingly participated. With a careful choice of commands, and a warm, friendly approach, even teens, who as a group are more self-conscious, will usually participate readily (see Christopherson, 2003; Garcia, 1996). The key to obtaining the students' cooperation and participation is your own enthusiastic performance of the actions (Silvers, 1985, p. 19), never asking them to perform any action which you yourself have not first performed, never asking them to do anything they obviously do not wish to do.

Before you begin, you may wish to rearrange the students' seats. A seating arrangement that has worked well for my classes is a semicircle or a horseshoe with the board and the teacher's desk at the open end. However, this setup is not obligatory, as most actions can also be performed in a more traditional classroom configuration.

A Basic Presentation and Practice Procedure

Here is a simple presentation and practice procedure. Call two students up front. Give them a command (*walk to the door*) and signal for them to silently perform the action along with you (they both walk with you to the door). This procedure is repeated with new words inserted into the original command (*walk to the window; walk to the board*). Next give the commands in a random order, but do not perform with the students. When you see that they are responding well, give the commands to them individually. You can work with one of them and then the other, or you can alternate between them, giving a command to one, and then a different command (or even the same command) to the other. Finally students who are seated are called to come up and perform. This

procedure is particularly useful for presenting and practicing commands that cannot be done at the students' seats, that is, commands that require movement or actions such as walking to the door, turning on the lights, or standing beside the teacher's desk. Note that the students are not asked to orally produce a set of commands until they demonstrate the ability to comprehend and instantaneously perform the associated actions (see the section **Role Reversal**).

One useful way of organizing the sets of commands is to use substitution frames or boxes. This is a compact, visually efficient way for you to have at your disposal a large number of commands using a set of (usually) related lexical items within a single grammatical structure. Be sure to vary the order of the inserted items so that the students are not just performing a memorized sequence. For this exercise, a church would be drawn on the board.

Walk to the
| door. |
| window. |
| desk. |
| board. |
| church. |
| teacher. |

If you prefer, the substitutions could also be written between parentheses: *Walk to the door (window, teacher, desk, board, church).* This works best when there are only a few substitution items. However, commands sometimes have two or even three substitution boxes, each with several items.

Below is an example of a three-box exercise, from which you can make more than sixty commands:

Point to the door	quickly	once.
Swim to the door	slowly	twice.
Touch the door	in slow motion	three
Tap on the door		times.
Knock on the door		
Open the door		
Close the door		

For practical tips and sources of actions that can be used in the classroom, see Cabello (2002); Christopherson (2003); Garcia (1996); Kalivoda (1987a); Seely and Romijn (2001); and Silvers (1994).

Commands for the Whole Class

Many commands can be done with everyone performing together at the same time, even with large groups. I have had all of my students stand up and walk *(run, jump, hop, march, swim)* in place. Many whole-class commands are done to or use a part of the body or common personal possessions *(touch your nose; show me your book).* You can expand the commands with adverbs of manner *(quickly, slowly, loudly, quietly)* and frequency *(once, twice).* To add variety to the lesson, you can use these commands with select parts of the class *(this half, this row, only the girls, etc.).* A whole-class procedure would be as follows: (1) everybody performs together with you; (2) everybody

performs, but you do not; (3) individuals (or parts of the class) perform. Here are some commands you can use with everybody together.

Intransitive verbs/uses (including verb + particle)

> stand up – sit down – breathe in – breathe out – relax
> wave – clap – stretch – pray– shave
> cough – sneeze – cry – laugh – sing – hum
> smile – frown – yawn – sleep – snore – wake up

Verb followed by a noun phrase or a prepositional phrase.

> Say (*sing, whisper*) hello to Pedro.
>
> Point to (*look at*) the door (*ceiling*).
>
> Point to (*touch*) your neck (*purse*).
>
> Pull your hair (*nose, ears*).
>
> Shake a friend (*your head*).
>
> Open (*close*) your eyes (*mouth, book*).
>
> Raise (*lower*) a hand (*both hands*).
>
> Fan (*pinch*) yourself (*a friend*).
>
> Pick up (*show me, put down*) your notebook.
>
> Wave to (*smile at*) the teacher.

Student-to-Student Commands

In these commands a student does something to or in relation to another student. The commands often entail light, playful physical contact, which helps to break down student inhibitions, enlivens the lesson, and engenders a sense of camaraderie. Below you will find two sets of simple commands. For more student-to-student commands, see Appendix D in Silvers (1988).

Pattern 1: Shake Pedro.

> Fan (pinch, poke)
>
> Give (show, hand, toss) your book to
>
> Jump (hop, run, swim) to
>
> Say (sing, whisper) hello to
>
> Shake hands with

Pattern 2: Bend Pedro's arm.

> Cover _____'s head.
>
> Touch (open, close) _____'s book.
>
> Pull _____'s hair (ears).
>
> Raise _____'s left hand.
>
> Squeeze _____'s nose.

Commands with Props

You can expand your repertoire of commands by using props or realia. While it will entail a little effort to assemble a set of props, they will enhance the lesson. Of course, a great number of actions can be performed with nothing other than the objects you normally find in a classroom. Here are four props I have used in my classes.

Plastic flower
- Smell the flower.
- Give the flower to Maria.

Candle
- Light the candle and blow it out.
- Point to the door with the candle.
- Measure the candle.

Sponge
- Squeeze the sponge.
- Drop the sponge on your head.
- Toss me the sponge.

Balloon
- Blow up the balloon.
- Hit the balloon with your right hand.
- Burst the balloon with your pen.

Commands with Cutouts

One productive and enjoyable action-based activity is to have students manipulate colored cutouts of geometric figures. To make the cutouts you can use light-weight cardboard or computer printouts which are then cut out and laminated. Be sure that the cutouts are big enough to be seen from the back of the class. The commands are given to two students who have been directed to stand behind the teacher's desk.

For this activity you will need a set of colored circles, triangles, rectangles, and squares. For each geometric figure, there are four cutouts: two big ones and two small ones. Furthermore, one big figure and one small figure are one color, and the other big and small figure are another. Here is the color scheme I use: circles (red, blue), triangles (green, brown), rectangles (orange, pink) and squares (yellow, black). I develop the activity in three stages, which are shown below, along with some sample commands.

A. Only shapes. Here you work with four big cutouts, one for each shape.

Point to the circle.
Touch it.
Pick it up.
Show it to the class.
Put it down.
Touch *(point to, pick up, show me)* the circle.
Put the circle on *(under, next to)* the square.
Pick up the triangle with your left hand.
Hold the rectangle in both hands.

Hide the square behind your back.

B. Color + Shape. You continue working only with the big cutouts, but now you use both colors for each shape, for a total of eight cutouts on the desk.

Touch the red circle.

Put the blue circle under the pink rectangle

C. Size + Color + Shape. Finally you add the small cutouts. There are now sixteen cutouts on the desk, and consequently the commands are considerably more demanding.

Touch the big red circle.

Put the small blue circle under the big pink rectangle.

Besides working with two students at the front desk, I also distribute a set of smaller cutouts to each student in the class. For practical purposes, I only work with the four shapes, but it would be possible to add a second dimension (either color or size).

I have also worked with cutouts of fish. I only use one size: large. As with the geometric figures, the commands are performed by two students at the front desk. Since fish have a well-defined front and back, you can use commands such as *Put the red fish behind the green fish.*

Contextualized Commands

The commands presented in this article are in a certain sense decontextualized: generally speaking, each command is its own individual context and can easily be understood without reference to a larger situation. While space does not permit a detailed presentation, I would like to mention several ways in which actions can be used within a larger unit of discourse.

A series of actions can form a logical connected sequence, often related to doing something such as using a calculator, making a cup of tea, or sharpening a pencil. For lessons based on actions in a series, see Romijn and Seely (2014) and Nelson, Winters and Clark (2007). Another contextualized approach is to relate the commands to a theme (e.g., at a restaurant), forming what Kalivoda (1987a) has called "Audio-Motor Units". Of particular interest in Kalivoda's (1987a) work is the possibility of "linking culture to language in a way that makes the cultural phenomena immediately obvious" (p. 5). In a somewhat similar vein, the commands can be part of a mini-story which is first understood and then acted out. For action-based story activities, see McKay (2003, 2013), Ray (1995a, 1995b), Ray and Seely (2015), and Seely and Romijn (2001, pp. 39-87).

Board Commands

I often work with two students at the board with commands that involve writing, drawing, and erasing. The students who are seated perform the same actions with the exception of erasing. The students at their seats can also give commands to the performers at the board.

Writing Commands

You can have your students write and erase numbers (as numerals), letters, words, phrases and sentences. For numbers, you can begin working with one to ten, or even

one to twenty. After an initial presentation, dictate the numbers in a random order. Then have the students erase them or cross them out, again in a random order. Next, say the numbers in sets of three with only a minimal pause between the numbers. For example, you say *twelve – three – eight,* and the students write *12 – 3 – 8.* You can use these same procedures in working with numbers from twenty to a hundred, and beyond. Another command that works well is *Write the number that comes before (after) ____.* You can also have your students write out large numbers (88,735); years (1965); dates (March 22, 2011); phone number (345-6591); and addresses (2330 Elm Street).

There are a number of possibilities for working with letters, words, and sentences. You can dictate individual letters or embed the letters in a longer command (*B; write a B; write the letter that comes after B).* You can work with commands that combine both letters and words (*write the word C-A-T*). In an excellent exercise suggested by Woodruff-Wieding and Ayala (1989), you put a row of blanks on the board, one blank for each letter of a word. You then use commands with ordinal numbers and prepositions of position to direct the students to fill in the blanks *(put a T in the third blank; to the left of it put an A).* You can also use statements *(there's a C in the first blank; the letter T goes in the third blank).* Finally, you can dictate short sentences and have the students circle *(underline, erase, cross out, draw a line through)* the first *(fourth)* word.

Drawing Commands

Drawing activities are among the most enjoyable and productive action-based activities. No artistic talent is needed; the drawings are very simple, using few lines or details. You can have your students draw and erase simple objects *(draw a fish – now erase it),* or a series of objects *(draw a fish, a house, and a comb – now erase them).* Or after several drawings are on the board, you can have the students erase them one by one. In fact, *erase* is a versatile command with many possibilities *(erase it quickly; after you erase the flower, erase the chair).* You can expand a simple drawing by adding details: *Draw a fat man. He has curly hair, big ears, and a long nose. He is crying. He is holding an umbrella in one hand, and a flower in the other.*

These simple drawings can then be used to produce a single composite drawing in which items are placed in spatial relationships. The students are first directed to draw a big rectangle and are then given a series of commands such as those in the example below.

1. In the center draw a house.
2. At the top, draw a triangle.
3. At the bottom, draw a tree.
4. Next to the house, on the left, draw a ruler.
5. Next to the house, on the right, draw an envelope.
6. Over the envelope, draw a hat.
7. Under the envelope, draw a heart.
8. In the upper left-hand corner, draw a circle.
9. In the upper right-hand corner, draw a chair.
10. In the lower left-hand corner, draw a door.
11. In the lower right-hand corner, draw a ball.

This activity can be developed over a number of class sessions using the following five steps or stages.

1. Three positions (commands 1-3)
2. Five positions (commands 1-5)
3. Seven positions (commands 1-7)
4. Only the four corners (commands 8-11)
5. All eleven positions.

Be sure to vary the order of the commands with each new drawing. Don't give the commands in a fixed order always beginning with *in the center*. Once a drawing is on the board, it can be used for traditional language practice in which the students ask and answer questions such as: *Is this a triangle? – Is there a triangle at the top? – What's this? – What's at the top? – Where's the triangle?* For a teacher's resource book of these drawing activities, see Silvers (2015).

Listening

There are several different kinds of commands that can be used to expand, stretch, and fine-tune the students' listening comprehension.

Chained Commands

You can chain two or three short previously practiced commands into one long command. The parts can be interrelated *(swim to the desk, pick up the sponge, and drop it on the floor)* or completely unconnected *(touch your nose, clap twice, and then shake hands with me).* I like to call several students up front and give each of them a chained command, working with the group until each student has performed individually two or more times. Chained commands are an effective way to recycle vocabulary. Furthermore, they lead the students to process the language in chunks rather than word by word. You will need a long list of commands. Possible substitutions within the elements of a command can be written in parentheses. Here are six chained commands (with a few adaptations) from Christopherson (2003, p. 12).

1. Run slowly to the door, turn around fast, jump to the teacher.
2. Touch your nose with your thumb, walk in place and sing.
3. Show me your hands, squat fast, lower your head.
4. Stand up slowly, raise your hands, close one hand, wave to X.
5. Hop to the teacher, open your mouth, laugh loudly, cry softly.
6. Point to your nose, whistle and tap your ear.

Structurally Complex Commands

Another effective way to stretch the students' listening comprehension is to use commands with relative and adverbial clauses. Beginners are quickly able to hear, instantly process, and immediately carry out these more complex commands.

Who	Pinch the student who's wearing a blue shirt.
That	Pick up the book that's on my desk.
Which	Write a number which is more than five, but less than nine.
Whose	Wave to the student whose book is on the floor.

After   After you stretch, touch your nose.

Before Before you sneeze, shake your head.

When   When I count to three, you will clap.

Until   Sing until I tell you to stop.

While   Cry while you walk to the door.

If If today is Monday, stand up.

Novel Commands

A novel command is a recombination of familiar words from directives the students have worked with into a new command that they have never heard before. For example, the students have worked with *Touch your nose* and *Touch the door.* A novel command would be *Touch the door with your nose.* Another way to create novel commands is to use words in a different grammatical category. For instance, a student standing in front of the class is directed to *point to, cover, and touch her face*. A novel command would be to follow this using *face* as a verb: *Face the door.* Novel utterances lead the learners to tolerate ambiguity and uncertainty and give them practice in guessing meaning using their present linguistic knowledge, context, probability and logical inferences. For examples of words with commands for their different grammatical uses, see Silvers (1988).

Impossible Commands

The occasional and unexpected utterance of an impossible command helps to keep the students alert. Impossible commands, such as *Jump to the ceiling, Stand on the teacher's head, Touch your neck with your elbow, Put the desk on your head,* test the students' comprehension and add an element of surprise and humor to the lesson.

Speaking

There are various ways in which actions can serve as the basis for oral production.

Role Reversal

After the students have mastered a certain amount of the language to the point where they can perform with little or no hesitation, the roles are reversed and they are invited to issue commands to the teacher and their classmates (Asher, 2009, pp. 4-18). First I put the verbs and the other vocabulary items the students have worked with on the board and do a quick teacher/class repetition. Then I invite the class to give me commands. In my experience, the students enjoy directing the teacher, and even the shyer students readily participate.

After two or three of these free-speaking role reversal classes, I introduce a more structured form of fluency practice. In these exercises the students are given a handout which has five to eight basic commands, each one with one or more substitution boxes. After working through the handout with the class, I have the students do the exercises in pairs.

Pairwork

Drawing commands, writing commands, commands with cutouts, and many action commands can easily be used with the students working at their seats in pairs or even in groups of three or four. Pairwork is a non-threatening activity that promotes greater student involvement and effectively maximizes individual speaking time. To be

successful, you will need to give the students a handout with the exercises on it or have the exercises displayed where they are easy to read. The exercises should consist of actions that can be performed at the students' seats.

Describing

This exercise has two parts. First you direct five to eight students to stand in different locations *(Maria, stand beside the desk; Pedro, stand in front of Maria).* Then individuals at their seats are called upon to produce a series of sentences describing the scene *(Maria is beside the desk; Pedro is in front of Maria/her).* The students can also be asked to describe actions that are in progress *(Maria is crying; Carlos and Sara are knocking on the door)*.

Remembering

After a series of actions has been performed, individuals are called upon to remember and describe. You can set up the exercise to focus on different verb forms and tenses: simple past of *BE (Maria was in the corner)*; simple past *(José walked to the board)*; present perfect *(Sara has just opened the door)*. It can also be used after a series of pictures has been drawn on the board and erased *(there was a tree; there were two hearts),* or after a large composite drawing involving spatial relationships inside a rectangle has been drawn and erased *(there was a cloud at the top)*. Asking the students to reconstruct from memory makes the activity more interesting and enjoyable because the challenge adds an "element of pleasurable tension associated with game-playing" (Ur, 2009, p. 18).

Grammar

Most grammatical structures can be embedded in a command that exemplifies and at least minimally contextualizes its basic meaning (Schessler, 1997; Silvers, 2013). Of course, this is only a first step, and these structures will have to be encountered again within a broader communicative approach.

Act and Say

In these exercises (Silvers, 2005, p. 232), the students first hear a command, and then they say what they are going to do, doing, did or have just done.

> T: Pedro, please clap.
> S: I'm clapping (spoken while performing).

This exercise is a good way of giving systematic practice with (a) the present progressive, (b) the future with *going to*, (c) the simple past, and (d) the present perfect. After the students have worked separately with each of these tenses, they can respond with a three-sentence series (*I'm going to clap. I'm clapping. I clapped. I have just clapped).* Two students (or everyone in the class for some commands) can perform together to practice forms with *we (we're clapping).* If the class, rather than the performer(s), provides the commentary, you can practice the third person pronouns (*he's/she's/they're clapping*). For examples of this "oral-motor" procedure with various grammatical features, see Kalivoda (1987b).

Sentence Combining

Oral-motor sentence combining (Kalivoda, 1987b) helps the students to gain control over more complex structures with phrases and clauses. You utter two sentences; one or both of which are commands. The actor performs the action and describes it combining the two utterances into a single sentence. Here is an examples adapted from Kalivoda.

> *WHOSE + noun*
> *T: Stand beside a girl. Her blouse is red.*
> *S: I'm standing beside a girl whose blouse is red.*

Vocabulary

Presenting the meaning of new words through gestures or a quick demonstration is a well-known technique found in numerous methodology textbooks. And in many situations, this is all you will want or need. However, if you want a lexical item to become part of your students' active vocabulary, you need to go beyond just a simple speedy presentation of meaning. A command-action approach to the vocabulary development of beginners does this both effectively and efficiently; it actively engages the students in a manner such that the lexical items or phrases pass into their long-term memory and become available for instantaneous retrieval.

There are several possible explanations for this long-term retention. Firstly, there is Asher's motor-skills hypothesis that "kinesthetic-sensorial...or muscle learning" produces long term recall "for the same reason that any manual skill such as ice-skating, bicycling or swimming has long-term recall" (Asher, 2009, p. 3-19). Stevick (1996) feels that TPR/action-based instruction "guarantees a certain minimum depth of processing, which probably accounts for its powerful effects on memory" (p. 132). He also stresses its "multisensory involvement," echoing Carroll's (1966) observation that "the more numerous kinds of association that are made to an item, the better are learning and retention" (p. 105). Finally there is Seely and Romijn's (2001) emotional involvement hypothesis: students in action-based classes are "in a more lively state and the learning thus has a strong emotional base, as well as a physical base" (p. 6).

Conclusion

This article has presented practical suggestions for the use of actions as a teaching procedure. The activities presented can enhance a lesson, adding variety and engaging the students, while supplementing and expanding textbook exercises, by giving extra practice in listening, speaking, grammar, and vocabulary development. While the use of actions as a classroom technique has been around in some form or another for a long time, with the exception of teachers using a TPR approach, actions are usually only employed sporadically as a quick demonstration of a lexical meaning; their full pedagogic potential is rarely realized. I hope this article will make teachers more aware of the potentials of action-based activities and inspire an interest in their use as a teaching technique or practice. As Larsen-Freeman and Anderson (2011, acknowledging Arends, 2004) aptly observe: "Effective teachers...have a large, diverse repertoire of best practices" (p. xii). Within this diverse repertoire of effective strategies, procedures, and techniques there is, I believe, a place for action-based activities.

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