

ReviewsMIND MATTERS: ACTIVITIES AND PUZZLES
FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Alan Maley and Françoise Grellet

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If language teaching in Mexico is to benefit from the increasing body of knowledge and experience among its practitioners, a highly creative and critical attitude is essential. Therefore, the following review is not just an experience in criticism, it is also a rationale for criteria of professional coherence. It is a stand for applied linguistics and a move away from vague eclecticism and adherence to 'new faiths'. In more exact terms, it is a plea for a deeper concern with and understanding of the learning process and the role of the teacher within it.

All of the following comments have been made with the language needs situation of Mexican students in mind and influencing the judgments I have made. In another situation my comments might have been different. I might have said more about the activities themselves, which could be classified, in a general way, as challenging, stimulating of lateral thinking,¹ and fun.

My only negative comments might have been in terms of two or three activities that presented partially or entirely unclear instructions

¹"Lateral thinking" is a term used by Edward de Bono in various publications on the topics of mental creativity and problem-solving. It refers to the type of thinking that 'good' problem-solvers use.

or illustrations, as well as the not always optimal use of illustrations in the section on magic. The authors could have used graphic representations of end results more often as feedback on success rather than just the "how-to" illustrations that predominate. I would probably also have commented on the fact that there is an obvious discriminatory tendency in the use of pronouns (e.g. "ask a friend if he...") and the disproportionate amount of male characters in the stories that occur mainly in Part 2.

However, my critique has taken a different direction, and there can be no avoiding the fact that the needs of Mexican students are different from the needs in other parts of the world. We cannot expect didactic materials written for other populations or with a world market in mind to meet all our needs here. It will usually be necessary to make important, well-thought-out adaptations of these materials or even discard them entirely if we are sincerely trying to satisfy these needs.

Mind Matters is basically an extensive collection of what claims to be, either explicitly or implicitly, in the title: mentally challenging "activities and puzzles." To what purpose it has been proposed as material for "language learners," as the title also states, is the matter I intend to investigate in detail here.

Directed to both students and teachers, it contains a very brief introduction (one page) dedicated to the "reader" (implicitly identified as the student), while the closing pages (four to be exact) are dedicated "to the teacher." In the introduction, the reader is given a first look at the types of activities the book will offer and an idea of how to work with the "Clues" and "Solutions" sections at the back of the book. The reader is also informed of the global organization of the book:

The first part is full of ideas for tricks and puzzles you can try out on your friends.

The second part will really make you think as you try

to break codes or find answers to brainteasers and riddles. For some of the more difficult problems, you may need to consult the clues at the back of the book.

Following this, the reader is informed in very general terms of the usefulness and "fun" involved in problem-solving activities for language practice: "Problem-solving activities are fun and can provide valuable language practice when done in pairs and small groups."

In the section dedicated to the teacher (p. 104-107), a somewhat less general account of the benefits of problem-solving is given, along with suggestions on how to organize group work and a list of examples of the "language functions" that are likely to be needed by the students. Pedagogical suggestions on what to do with the list follow it. These are based on the authors' experience:

it is useful to introduce some of the key language briefly just before the activity (e.g. on memo cards). While the activity is going on, the students are at liberty to refer to the cards. Little by little, they will learn to do without them. When the activity is over we have found it better not to analyse and correct the language performance immediately, but unobtrusively to return to points of difficulty in subsequent weeks. (emphasis mine)

But what are the explicit or implicit pedagogical goals stated here? Communicative or merely linguistic competence? An attempt to provide situations that stimulate the development of communicative and learning strategies or merely an attempt to provide situations in which language can be "practiced" (whatever that implies)?

In order to understand what these goals are, it would be helpful to know how the authors expect learning to come about through

problem-solving. But instead of this, we are only given a few of the "advantages" of using the book to "stimulate discussion." It is good for "provoking the expression of real opinions and points of view" and for getting the learners "personally involved." We are also told about the "pay-off in pedagogical terms" (objectives?) which is expected to "come in the development of: i) speech functionsii) structures.....and iii) vocabulary....." (p. 104).

But we are not told how all this will come about. Therefore, we have no idea of what it means to "briefly introduce" the very many language functions only exemplified in the two-page list. Nor do we have any idea of what the authors mean by "unobtrusively" returning to "points of difficulty in subsequent weeks."

If these 'points of difficulty' have to do with elements of the communicative competence of the learners, then I wonder why a problem-solving approach such as this would advise "unobtrusive" delayed action when on-the-spot facilitation would be more effective, given that the problem-solving situation itself provides the background for making teacher/facilitator intervention significant.² If the 'points of difficulty' refer to elements of merely linguistic competence, then I wonder why the authors are so keen on a problem-solving approach which, by definition, must emphasize communicative competence and strategies of communication and learning, and any "points of difficulty" should be immediately recognizable because the problem-solving situation itself draws the learner's attention to them. Any interventions on the part of the teacher that did not respond to this sort of immediate need could not help but be anything but obtrusive! So, obviously, there is some sort of misunderstanding that the authors should be able to clear up but didn't attempt to in this book.³

²My article, "Trap Setting in Didactic Materials" (to be published in the April 1984 issue of the Journal) deals with significant interventions of this sort.

³The authors have both written other works on the subject, but what I have read (Maley in Johnson and Morrow, 1981) makes this no clearer to me.

It is easy to be misled by a book which presents itself as being concerned with problem-solving and to think that it will also be overtly concerned with the understanding and facilitation of mental processes. One tends to read into their words an undeserved (and probably never claimed) concern for the learning process. However, the paradigms on which this book are based are evident in the unqualified use of such terms as "language practice" and "development of structures and vocabulary." This unquestioning faith in a communicative approach is not too different from the audio-lingual faith in the 'fact' that something like communicative competence followed automatically from linguistic competence. The new faith of the communicative approach is that if a situation can be provided in which learners have to "communicate" (synonymous with "real opinions and points of view" and "personal involvement"?), then no matter with whom or about what, language will be miraculously acquired.

In this new faith, the teacher's role is that of organizer of activities. All the teacher has to do is stand by and listen for "difficult points" so that they can be "unobtrusively" returned to later. There is little concern for the type or amount of input the learner is receiving or how it becomes "comprehensible" and "acquired." Neither is there a concern for the teacher's role as psycholinguistic facilitator of language acquisition.

Mind Matters gives no mention of what types of language needs it can respond to nor does it mention types of learning needs which depend on factors such as age of student and approximate levels of language ability. It is a production (output) centered approach as evidenced by the expressed "payoff" expected and the obvious unconcern for the input the students receive in terms of the written texts or the types of "interaction" that can occur between reader and co-reader and between reader(s) and written text.

Although I have no intention of denying the perfectly valid and obvious benefits in terms of confidence-building that can be produced through successful communication in the target language

with co-learners, I do not think that interaction with co-learners has been proven to be a source of highly adequate comprehensible input. Neither will I deny the benefits of interaction with the teacher in terms of the resolution of questions concerning the activities. But teacher/student talk is only one source of input, and in many cases, especially in countries where English is a foreign language, the teacher's own spoken English is somewhat limited. It is partly for these reasons that the written text, taken from authentic sources, has been widely used as material for input here in Mexico.

Mexico is not yet at the point (and possibly never will be) when time-killers and idle parlor games can be considered entirely and unquestionably adequate for classroom use. There are too many important and interesting things to do that can be at least as entertaining, challenging and stimulating as these activities. For language learners, authentic problems with the target language can be the "brainteasers" and "logical problems" that provoke "the expression of real opinions and points of view.

An occasional game of the sort presented in Mind Matters, and found in other collections of the sort, can be fun and challenging too. However, the profit obtained from it in terms of learning will depend on more than just group organization and the identification of "difficult points" to return to. It will depend on the teacher's ability to identify the sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic needs of her students and respond to them in a fashion more coherent than a vague eclecticism or a 'new faith'.

References

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