

A sample class

Let's look more closely at the multilevel class described in Chapter One, in which the students vary in age, cultural background, literacy skills, oral abilities, previous education, and personality. Although relatively young, Yvonne, the teacher of this class, is an experienced instructor and has organized her program around a number of themes, or subject areas of interest to her students. This particular lesson is part of a food theme that Yvonne began the previous week.

Yvonne arrives early and does her best to set the public school classroom up to look inviting for her students, despite the fact that it is designed for ten-year-olds and many of the desks are unsuitably small. As she drags the desks into clusters of six, she reminds herself to nag the night school principal one more time about getting her permission to use one of the other rooms where the chairs and tables are more suitable for the adults in her class.

She greets all the students as they arrive, making a point of chatting to the basic students, getting them used to social patterns of interaction even though they do not understand her language. Once most of the class has arrived, she shifts from individual conversations to addressing the whole group, pulling everyone into her comments on Rosa's new hairstyle and Johnny's new shirt, and asking whether anyone knows anything about two students who have not shown up.

When the social chat is exhausted, she pulls out a large colored picture of a family in a pizza restaurant, which she got by writing to the head office of the chain and asking for any outdated advertising material. She asks the class to describe what they can see, initially addressing the newest students and writing on the board the single words or simple factual phrases, such as "family" and "they eating" that are offered. Higher-level students comment on the server bringing the food, the people in the background of the picture, and the fact that the little boy has got pizza sauce on his nose. Yvonne makes no attempt to record these lengthy sentences, but does add some of the key vocabulary items to the board.

Some of the beginners listen to these exchanges; others, such as the two sisters from Ecuador, are busy copying the words from the blackboard. As Yvonne turns her attention to the most fluent students, she

guides them to comment on the social patterns suggested by the picture. Topics such as children's behavior in a restaurant, ways of attracting a server's attention, and tipping are touched on. One of the Italian men comments that North American families eat out a lot, which provokes surprise from some of the Oriental students, who feel they ate out more frequently at home. This leads into a general discussion about fast food and the types of items that are available in different countries. Everyone joins in, if necessary resorting to translation, listing ingredients, and even making quick chalk drawings on the blackboard to get their points across.

When all the students have had a chance to contribute to this discussion, Yvonne moves on to the next phase of the lesson. She asks the three beginners with minimal literacy skills (Marta and Carmela from Ecuador, and Yusefi from Afghanistan), to pair off with the three most advanced students (Hector, the shop-floor manager from Uruguay; the young Chinese student, Johnny; and Larissa, the Russian woman). She tells the literacy-level students to dictate descriptions of the restaurant picture that will be transcribed without correction by the advanced students, who will then help the beginners read it back. Yvonne makes it clear to the advanced students that they will be asked to correct the material later, thus trying to avoid their turning the transcription task into a grammar lesson, although she knows from experience that they will not be able to resist helping the descriptions along a little. She makes sure that Hector works with Yusefi, as she suspects that the sisters will fall back on using Spanish too much if she allows them to work with a Spanish speaker, although she is grateful for Hector's ability to translate her instructions and thus get the activity off to a good start. Yusefi's listening skills are still quite limited, and he looks a little baffled initially but soon catches on once he sees Marta and Carmela at work.

Yvonne then sets to work with the middle group, creating a language experience story based on the oral work done with the picture. She asks each student to contribute a sentence describing some part of the picture, and she records the sentence on the board, reading it back as she does so. She works with the text that the group has created, asking students to read out certain words or sentences depending on

their level. Then she rubs out some words and phrases and gives the chalk to the students to write them in again.

The text contains a number of errors, some of which go unnoticed, some of which get pointed out by more fluent students. A typical sentence is “Woman asking server more coffee.”

Yvonne decides to work with this sentence in more depth and do some structural work. She writes the sentence on a clean piece of chalkboard and gives the students a chance to correct it before she demonstrates the correct form herself. She works with this sentence pattern for about five minutes, using a pattern table to show how different words can be substituted into the content slots to produce a range of other sentences.

The woman			the server		coffee
The government	is	asking	the people	for more	money
The child			her mother		candy

Finally she asks the students to copy the experience story from the board while she organizes the next activity.

She tells the three advanced students to make their own copies of the beginners’ stories, take them away, correct them, and develop extra paragraphs comparing the North American scene portrayed in the restaurant picture with a typical restaurant scene from their own country. Once they have completed the first draft of this written assignment, they are to read the stories to each other for critical feedback.

The three beginners watch Yvonne as she hurries to lay out the next activity for the middle group, a pair exercise involving giving and following oral instructions. One partner of each pair is given a sheet on which are glued twelve pictures of food items cut from advertising fliers. The other student has the same pictures jumbled in a pile, and must follow the partner’s oral instructions to achieve the same arrangement as on the sheet. Once the task is completed, both partners compare results to see how accurate they were, and swap their game with that of another pair of students.

While this is going on, Yvonne returns to the beginners and looks at the language experience stories that they have dictated. She suspects that the first few sentences are those most likely to have been genuinely produced by the beginners, and accordingly focuses her attention there. She selects for pattern practice a sentence that occurs in similar form in all three narratives, “Family in restaurant,” and expands it to

“The family is in the restaurant.”

Working with this small group of beginners, her goal is to develop word-recognition skills as well as to teach the structural pattern. Instead of using the chalkboard, as she did with the middle group, she writes each word of the sentence on an individual card. These can be turned face down to focus attention on a particular word, or the cards for the whole sentence can be shuffled and re-ordered by the students. When the students demonstrate that they can recognize the individual words and recreate the basic sentence pattern, Yvonne writes out a few extra word cards to substitute for the words “family” and “restaurant.” The students are thus introduced to all the variations of “The mother/ father/ child is in the restaurant/ store/ house.”

After this the class takes a coffee break. The advanced students come up to Yvonne and show her what they have been working on. She tells them she will take their work home and look at it more closely, but gives an initial encouraging comment before suggesting they all go for coffee together. She is aware that the advanced students haven’t had much individual attention today, so makes a point of drinking her coffee with them and encouraging them to talk.

After the break, Yvonne sets out some self-access material² that she has prepared related to the theme of food. She has gathered exercises and activities from a variety of sources, and she will let the students choose what they want to work on. Gathering this material is time-consuming but, because of the amount of choice involved, she can put out the same materials on three or four occasions. She also swaps materials with other teachers, thus reducing the preparation load. On this occasion she puts out activities that focus on listening, speech, reading, writing, and accuracy.

² See Chapter 8 for a detailed discussion of self-access material.

For listening, she has recorded a conversation in a butcher's shop in which the price of a number of items is asked. Two different tasks accompany the tape. One is a partially completed table of items and prices that requires the listener only to identify a few prices. The other is a set of comprehension questions that ask not only for factual information but also for assessment of the customer's reactions to the prices and the butcher's reaction to the string of questions.

Speech activities to be done with a partner include suggestion cards for role plays; dialogues cut into strips and scrambled, to be re-ordered then read aloud; and information-gap activities, in which partners have to get information from each other.³

Reading and writing activities include comprehension exercises based on finding information from food advertisements or menus, and cartoons and short stories relating to the food theme. Activities that focus on accuracy ask the students to match food pictures with vocabulary cards, to manipulate grammar patterns, or to select socio-culturally appropriate remarks to restaurant and sales staff.

Yvonne's students are used to this style of working and know what she expects of them. As they return from coffee, they wander around the room looking at what is available and select an activity that they think will be challenging and interesting. They are aided in their choice by the color-coded stickers that Yvonne has attached to the materials. These use the colors of the rainbow as a mnemonic, with red indicating the easiest materials. While the students choose their activities, Yvonne circulates, clarifying instructions or helping with the selection if necessary. Answers are provided on the reverse of the materials where necessary, so students can correct their own work and Yvonne can focus on explaining rather than marking. Some of the students select materials that are apparently unsuitable, and that may not seem to provide much challenge. By contrast, the Russian man takes the most difficult accuracy activity and spends a long period of time puzzling over the instructions. Yvonne leaves him alone and honors his choice as she does that of the other students. As she circulates, she pays particular attention to the work done by the

³ See Chapter 7 for more detail on information gap activities.

two students she has selected for observation today. By doing regular scheduled observations focusing on just a couple of students each day, Yvonne gathers valuable information on progress without having to spend too much class time on formal assessment.⁴

The self-access materials keep the students occupied until the last few minutes of class, when Yvonne pulls everyone together again for a group discussion before the class finishes. She asks the students which activities they enjoyed most and which were most useful. The students don't necessarily agree. Many of the students in the large middle group say they enjoyed the game of matching food pictures, but the older Chinese man feels the pattern practice was the most useful and comments that the game of matching pictures was a waste of time. His son speaks to him in Mandarin, explaining the language goals of the game, but the older man remains unconvinced. Most of the students agree that they like the free choice element of the self-access material and ask if they can continue with the activity in the next class. Yvonne agrees to this, and makes a note to incorporate it into her lesson planning before saying good-bye to the students.

Planning of the sample class

The most cursory glance over this description of a lesson will show us that Yvonne was able to provide activities that kept all the students occupied throughout the class. If we look more closely, however, we will see that the selection of activities was not random, but carefully orchestrated.

First, Yvonne wanted to provide enough variety to maintain interest, while limiting the content sufficiently to avoid information overload. She did this by providing a variety of different exercises but selecting a common theme of food throughout. The vocabulary items and certain structural patterns could thus be recycled throughout the varied activities. This made the language demands easier for the beginning students without restricting the more advanced students. As we can see from the following chart, despite the variety of activity the language focus is quite tight.

⁴ See Chapter 3 on Assessment for a fuller discussion.

Activity	Language focus
Social chat	Use of social formulae Advanced: Sociocultural interaction
Describing picture	Food and restaurant vocabulary Advanced: discussing sociocultural norms
Dictating story about picture	Food and restaurant vocabulary Structures using present and present-continuous tenses
Pattern practice	Structures using present and present-continuous tenses
Matching picture game	Food vocabulary Present-tense structures, including imperatives
Writing about food	Advanced: Sociocultural norms in own culture
Self-access material	Food vocabulary plus student-selected focus

Another feature, shown in the chart below, is the arrangement of groupings to capitalize on the benefits of the multilevel class.

whole-group activities	social chat describing picture final wrap-up
equal-ability groups	pattern practice matching picture game writing and editing each other's work
cross-ability groups	transcribing stories some self-access activities
individual work	self-access activities

To build up group unity, Yvonne made sure she incorporated certain activities in which the whole class worked as a unit despite the variety of abilities and backgrounds. Activities such as talking about a visual stimulus allow students to contribute at their own level, and thus are suitable for the whole group. She recognizes, however, that certain tasks, such as teaching grammar, are firmly linked to a particular ability level. To provide that kind of input, therefore, she took advantage of the times when the class was grouped by ability. She also made use of the uneven nature of some tasks, such as transcribing someone else's story, to provide an opportunity for students of very different abilities to work together. This is valuable not only as a way of building group unity and providing some individual attention for the beginners but also because the teacher role tends to push the advanced students into a greater awareness of how the language operates and helps them to identify areas of their own expertise that need attention.

The exercises were also organized with regard to the type of activity. Yvonne's long term planning incorporates the four basic skills (listening, speaking, reading, and writing) plus pronunciation, development of language strategies, socio-cultural awareness, and orientation information for those who need it. She knows that not all these will necessarily be covered in every lesson, but she nonetheless tries to provide a balance of the skills with extra emphasis on students' weakest skill areas. In this lesson, the breakdown of activities by skill is shown in the chart below.

Activity	Level		
	beginner	intermediate	advanced
social chat	listening sociocultural	speaking and listening sociocultural	speaking and listening
describing picture	oral/vocab orientation	oral	oral/ sociocultural

Activity	Level		
	beginner	intermediate	advanced
language experience story	speaking reading	speaking reading	Transcription writing (including editing)
pattern practice	writing	writing	
matching picture game	listening	speaking	
writing about own culture and editing other's work		writing speaking listening	reading

As the table demonstrates, the lesson provided practice in the basic skills for students at all levels. It did not, however, cover pronunciation; Yvonne will note this in her evaluation of the lesson and make sure that this area receives attention in future lessons.

Related to this question of providing a balance of activities in the various skill areas is the purpose of those activities. The term "speaking activity," for example, can be used to cover everything from discussing another student's piece of writing to a choral repetition drill. The first activity is done without any supervision from the teacher, and the measure of its success is whether or not the writer can be persuaded to amend his or her copy without offense being given. In other words, the focus of the activity is on using the language not for its own sake but for the purpose of achieving something; that is, on the meaning of what is said, not on the form of words chosen.

The drill, by contrast, focuses firmly on the form of the words. It is done under supervision, and its success is measured by how closely the form is reproduced, not by the meaning of what is said. Generally speaking, we do activities of this type to improve students' accuracy, to

teach them new language forms, and to correct errors. Accuracy exercises need not focus only on grammatical points. An activity that requires students to recognize the degree of formality in a conversation or that asks them to produce polite and impolite refusals is also an accuracy activity, because the students' attention is focused on the form of the words being chosen, rather than on the meaning of the words.

Students need both accuracy and fluency activities, of course. An initial focus on form allows them to recognize the learning point and focus on it. Unfortunately, simply knowing a rule doesn't always mean it can be used in real life. Too often, when we are really trying to communicate and our focus is on the meaning of what we are saying or hearing, we forget all about these learned rules. We need a chance to try out this knowledge in as real a situation as possible, where we can measure our success by how well we get our message across. Fluency exercises allow for this.

Yvonne's planning incorporated both kinds of activity, as this chart shows.

Activity	Language focus
Social chat	Fluency
Describing picture	Fluency (offering spontaneous comments) Accuracy (checking out sentence structures with teacher)
Dictating story about picture	Fluency
Pattern practice	Accuracy
Matching picture game	Fluency
Writing about food	Fluency (giving information on own culture) Accuracy (editing)
Self-access material	Accuracy or fluency at own choice