

English Raven's "Language Shack" Activity

Recommended for
Yls aged 9-12 and
teenagers!

Activity Introduction and Overview

This activity works from the concept that utilizing language is very much like building a little house (or "shack") for our communicative message to "live in". Just as with a real house, the quality of the building determines both how welcoming it 'looks' from the outside and how structurally sound and therefore 'reliable' it actually is. To build this little language shack, we need materials and a builder's skill. The materials are planks (the substantial pieces, representing content words and meanings) and nails (the little pieces, helping us link the language together to make it sound). The builder's skill is represented by the language user.



This activity, therefore, is all about learning how to apply content words, grammatical inflexions, and function words to make communicative information more complete, or 'sound'. Various teaching methods and approaches over the decades have (intentionally or inadvertently) encouraged language learners to focus either on communicative content at the expense of accuracy and form, or vice versa. This little activity was first designed and utilized in a content-based learning course, where students were absorbing plenty of communicative content but not really trying hard enough to express it with grammatical accuracy. After some experimentation and adaptation, it became a handy supplementary activity to ensure that students were doing some work on *form* in conjunction with reviewing their knowledge of the content studied.

How it Works...

The activity essentially works off the idea of the 'gap-fill' concept, but is more or less orientated around dividing students' attention between two kinds of 'gap' - one that requires a knowledge of content-based vocabulary along with correct grammatical endings or inflexions, and another that asks students to apply function words to make the content slot together into accurately expressed sentences.

It is generally important to select base material that represents a 'complete' message, preferably drawn from the themes or topics the students are studying. I have found simple science and history-based materials to be the most effective, as they generally apply very different kinds of vocabulary and grammatical constructions. A science selection may utilize present simple tense to explain rules and theories, or it may focus on imperative forms to explain how to carry out a simple experiment. History, on the other hand, can give students valuable exposure to past tense forms and 'cause and effect' like sentences. Utilizing materials such as these are handy for drawing on general or 'world' knowledge that the students may be able to bring some schematic experience to - based on what they are studying in other subjects at school. There are, however, plenty of other options for the core content and these just represent my personal preferences. Whatever material is selected, it is generally important that it is drawn from a theme or topic the students already have some experience discussing or listening to as part of the L2 learning process. It is also important that the selection is not too long or too short for the students' ability.

Once a text has been selected, the teacher makes two versions of it. The first version has all or many of the main *content* words blanked out (i.e., key nouns, main verbs, adjectives, adverbs, etc.). The second version has all or a selection of *function* words blanked out (for example: articles, prepositions, auxiliary verbs such as "be" and "do", etc.). The aim is to complete one or both versions of the text, utilizing a range of skill-building activities as outlined below.

Ideas for Applying the Activity

Warm-up:

As the name suggests, this is to get the students used to the format and start using it in a way that is not particularly difficult. Using one or the other of the blanked out text versions, brainstorm as a class which words can be used to fill the gaps. As solutions are found and verified by the teacher, students slot them in to complete the text.

Interactive:

This is a basic information gap exercise where students pair up and look at separate versions of the text. They inform each other what the missing words are, filling in their respective versions as they go. Simple as it sounds (and is), the activity actually helps to get students talking, thinking and negotiating meaning. To help each other out and to work out what words are needed, students will find it easier to work carefully through each sentence, uttering it aloud so that a friend can call out when he/she has heard the element needed to complete their version. Through this method, they are also able to help each other out with spelling and punctuation.

Focus on Content:

This is a good way to review key vocabulary in use from a topic or theme the students have been studying, and utilizes the format whereby all of the function words are present but the content words have been removed. It could be applied as part of group work, or individually (this format is commonly used in many testing approaches for both L1 and L2 study). If you would like to make the activity a little faster and easier, include a vocabulary bank at the bottom of the page, allowing students to find and apply the words to the text as they go. In most cases, using this activity will be active encouragement to focus on constructing communicative meanings.

Focus on Form:

This is an extension of *Focus on Content* above, except that in this case the content words have been applied using incorrect grammar (for example, plural instead of singular, incorrect tense, etc.). The context and the existing (visible) function words should help the students to come up with some ideas on how to change and thus apply each content word using appropriate grammar.

Focus on Function:

This is the opposite of *Focus on Content*, in that all of the content words (along with appropriate inflexions and endings) are included in the text, but all of the function words have been removed. In this case, the students will know what is being talked about, but will need to come up with function words to link everything together and help it all 'flow' correctly. This can be particularly handy when highly communicative students appear to know all of the content in the theme/topic and can talk about it with fluency and confidence, yet produce language full of 'small holes' that inhibit the overall clarity or accuracy of sentences. As in *Focus on Content*, the function words to be applied could be listed in a word bank to make the activity easier for the students.

Content, Form and Function:

This activity brings all of the various considerations together and requires students to think about content, form and function all at the same time. Using the two versions of the text, a double-sided handout can be created whereby the content gap-fill is on one side and the function gap-fill is on the other. Have students (individually or in groups) tackle one side of the sheet for 2-3 minutes, after which they flip the page over and work on the other side for 2-3 minutes. It is possible to keep alternating the focus for up to 30 or 40 minutes, but the shorter the time limit for each side (irrespective of frequency), the more you are likely to be encouraging equal attention to content, form and function. While students are filling gaps on one side of the page, they are not permitted to flip the paper to see the solutions on the other side. It is interesting to watch students tackle this, as in my experience most of them try to 'memorize' most of the words on one side to then apply to the other after 2-3 minutes, and vice-versa. From what I have seen, the most

successful students eventually wind up dealing with individual sentences one at a time, applying what they can remember and hypothesizing/ guessing for the other gaps, which they then come back to two turns later to check and/or self-correct. Making guesses and taking risks usually sees students finish the activity much quicker.

Just remember that you need not adhere strictly to pure content words versus pure function words. I try to create versions of the text that have gaps right where my students appear to 'need' them: that is, I try to target the words and/or grammatical endings I do not hear or read in their production but would like to! For focus on form, I often differentiate the verbs by typing them in italics in the content version, and including the final letter in the function version (to encourage the students to focus more on suffixes). Similarly, I may write the first letter for nouns in the function version, to jog the students' memories if the content involved some heavy or complicated vocabulary. It is really up to the teacher as to how to target specific areas of content, form and function, and the best way to go about it is to think carefully about where the students have shown deficiencies during other language activities.

As a final application (and it is really great if you can get your students to this stage!), students can be asked to create their own content/form versus function versions of texts, to be used in class with classmates.

Students' Reactions to the Activities

From my own experience in this area, the preliminary activities (Warm Up, Interactive, Focus on Content, Focus on Form, Focus on Function) are relatively easy for the students to handle after one or two tries. They can quickly lose their appeal if they are repeatedly used. The final activity, calling for focus on all three areas at once, is the real challenge, and students initially complain that it is much too difficult (in my own experience this was because the standard learning strategies they had built up for themselves didn't help all that much - they needed to approach the activity using a variety of different strategies in order to do well on it). By making a quiz or a competition out of it (even grading such activities on an ongoing basis as part of an overall informal assessment grade), students begin to take it more seriously, and to see it more as a challenge rather than a chore. I have also seen positive effects generated by making the activity a 'standard' task at the conclusion of theme or topic based learning subjects. Knowing the activity would come later, during initial lessons focused on meaning and general discussion I've seen students deliberately make small notes about 'sentence environments' for new content words they are learning. Though I haven't seen enormously spectacular results, I have noticed improvement in oral and written production both prior to and following the activity. The activity *does* work in terms of illustrating to students that it's not just the 'boards' you need to build a house, it's also the 'nails' and the building technique.

Example Texts

On the following two pages you will find separate versions of a short science-based text drawn from a chapter of ESL 5 from the Scott Foresman ESL series. In these versions (for the content/form-based application), verbs have been italicized and include the final letter, and nouns include a first letter hint.

Focus on **Function****Salt Water _____ Fresh Water**

_____ earth is covered _____ water. _____ earth's water is _____ oceans. There are four oceans _____ earth. _____ are _____ Pacific, Atlantic, Indian, _____ Arctic Oceans. Look _____ globe _____ see _____ are connected.

Ocean water is salty. _____ cannot use salt water _____ drinking, cooking, _____ washing. _____ is _____ salt _____ ocean water _____ drinking _____ can make _____ sick. Washing metal things _____ ocean's water causes _____ rust.

Only _____ small amount _____ earth's water is fresh. _____ fresh water is _____ form _____ ice _____ North _____ South Poles. _____ rest _____ earth's fresh water is _____ rivers _____ lakes. _____ is _____ underground. _____ can use fresh water _____ drinking, cooking, _____ washing.

_____ living things need water

People, animals, _____ plants need water _____ stay alive. _____ need water _____ live _____ grow.

Farmers need water _____ grow crops. _____ need water _____ animals _____ raise. _____ dry places, farmers must irrigate. _____ must water _____ fields.

People need water _____ stay clean. People use water _____ wash _____. _____ use water _____ wash _____ clothes _____ dishes.

Focus on **Content/Form****S** _____ **W** _____ **and F** _____ **W** _____

Most of the e_____ s c_____ with w_____. Most of the e_____ w_____s in the o_____. There _____e f_____ o_____ on e_____. They _____e the P_____, A_____, l_____, and A_____ O_____. _____k at a g_____ to _____e how they _____e c_____.

O_____ w_____ s s_____. You _____t _____e s_____ w_____ for d_____, c_____, or w_____. There _____s so much s_____ in o_____ w_____ that _____g it _____n _____e you s_____. _____g m_____ t_____ in the o_____ w_____ _____s them to _____t.

O_____ a s_____ a_____ of the e_____ w_____ s f_____. Most f_____ w_____s in the f_____ of i_____ at the N_____ and S_____ P_____. The r_____ of the e_____ f_____ w_____ s in r_____ and l_____. It _____s also u_____. You _____n _____e f_____ w_____ for d_____, c_____, and w_____.

All I _____ **t** _____ **d w** _____

P_____, a_____, and p_____ d w_____ to _____y a_____. They _____d w_____ to _____e and _____w.

F_____ d w_____ to _____w c_____. They also _____d w_____ for the a_____ that they r_____. In d_____ p_____, f_____ _____t _____e. They _____t _____r their f_____.

P_____ d w_____ to _____y c_____. P_____ _____e w_____ to _____h themselves. They _____e w_____ to _____h their c_____ and d_____.