Introduction

This book provides a collection of creative classroom activities designed for busy teachers who wish to enhance language learning by integrating the personal experiences, feelings, values and opinions of individual learners into their classrooms. The activities are likely to be used as occasional enrichments to supplement your own course materials, adding a personally relevant dimension to otherwise impersonal text-book generated work.

The need for personalization: motivation and involvement

As language teachers, we are well aware that learners need to be motivated in order to be successful. Personal involvement is one very effective way of enhancing motivation. By this, we mean making language learning content personally meaningful. If learners feel that what they are asked to do is relevant to their own lives, and that their feelings, thoughts, opinions and knowledge are valued, and crucial to the success of the activities, then they will be fully engaged in the tasks and more likely to be motivated to learn the target language.

Textbooks, the core material for most classrooms, however, very often fail to achieve this level of involvement by learners. A great deal of commonly used material, particularly that used to model or elicit dialogue, is based on imaginary characters. Many listening or reading texts revolve around pre-selected topics which may have little interest for learners. Practice in particular language areas (e.g. grammar or pronunciation) is generally provided in exercises developed from these initial stimuli.

One example of a typical coursebook approach to the study of 'likes and dislikes' goes as follows. The language area is often presented or practised within the context of fictional characters who bear no relation to students' own lives. The lesson proceeds with students talking about what these imaginary people do and don't like, perhaps taking on the role of a specific character. A whole lesson could pass with only cursory reference to what the learners actually feel about things themselves.

There is no doubt that there are some learners who will be motivated

regardless of the materials they use; there is also no doubt that many will not. There are always those who will fail to be inspired by materials which ignore their own world view. It is surprisingly easy, particularly when working with traditional materials, to neglect learners' individuality by omitting personally meaningful content.

The foreign language teacher is, however, in a position to enable truly interesting material to be used in class. The foreign language classroom has a flexibility unavailable in other subjects. Language learning aims can be achieved without teachers having to confine themselves to set texts or subjects. This being the case, the approach we advocate in this book is to take the learners themselves as the starting point for language practice. To stay with the example of likes and dislikes, learning is likely to be much more effective for far more learners if the teacher uses the students' own likes and dislikes (see 1.6) as the basis for an activity.

Specifically, we have found that our activities help in

- creating trust between class and teacher;
- facilitating positive group dynamics with your class;
- securing honest, helpful, and interesting feedback;
- bringing humour into the classroom;
- making language learning something you and your students will recall with affection;
- making language learning memorable.

Taking a humanistic approach

Some teachers have reservations about taking a humanistic approach. These teachers are concerned that they should not 'play the psychologist' in their classes; they fear they may delve too deep into their learners' personalities and they feel that the classroom may be the wrong place to do this. These same teachers may, however, feel that their classrooms need invigorating, their learners need remotivating and need to feel that the language learning class is personally relevant.

The activities presented in this book aim to involve learners' thoughts, opinions, knowledge and feelings with what they are learning without prying or making learners reveal what they would rather not. It helps to preserve individuals' right to privacy, and to create a feeling of trust in the classroom, if you make sure that learners know they will not be forced to participate; they should have the right to 'pass' in an activity. The activities do vary, from the mild revelations in 1.3 'Name round' to the potentially deeper discussions in 6.1 'My past, my self'. You yourself are the best judge of how comfortable you and your learners are with more revealing activities.

Teacher participation

We feel it improves the general atmosphere if you participate in the activities yourself. By participate, we mean that you should contribute in ways that are similar to how the students are contributing: if the students are asked to relate an important event from the past, the teacher should also do so. Unlike traditional activities, ours are eminently suitable for this. Everybody knows that the teacher can correctly complete a grammar exercise, but nobody knows what months were special to their teacher (see 7.6 Months in my life). Your participation should help learners to understand clearly what they have to do, as well as provide examples of appropriate language. In addition, we have found that this type of teacher participation has a positive effect on teacher–learner relationships, creates a comfortable classroom climate, and develops a trusting atmosphere between all participants.

Organization

The book is divided into eight sections as follows.

Chapter 1, 'Starting the course', provides opportunities for learners to talk to each other about themselves – who they are, what they are like, what is / has been important to them, what they like and dislike and their current attitude to the target language. As well as being used to begin a course, activities from 'Starting the course' can be used mid-course for a group that hasn't seemed to gel, or for a group starting a new academic year.

Chapter 2, 'Warming up', takes the ice-breaking a stage further. It looks at different topics and relates them directly to students' own lives. Learners are asked to think about particular places and events they consider important, to make careful observations of sounds and objects and to work collaboratively, finding out what they have in common with each other.

Chapter 3, 'Acting, reacting, interacting', is concerned with maximizing classroom opportunities for interaction. It contains activities which produce short narrations, student-generated dialogues, role plays, drama, and written interaction.

Chapter 4 is called 'Self-awareness and self-assertion'. All the activities in this chapter demand a high degree of interaction with others. There are three strands. The first, awareness of self, in this chapter means asking learners to think about what they are like in terms of physical appearance and personality, and to recognize their own qualities. This strand also asks them to think about themselves in terms of what makes them angry and what makes them laugh. The second,