

Problem Posing Activities in Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract

The problem-posing approach is a conversational, real-life approach based on the teaching philosophy of Paulo Freire, who felt that language learning should be relevant to the social context of the learners' lives. The key elements of Freire's approach are: generative words located in people's surroundings, dialogue, thematic breakdown, and codification. The workshop contains the following parts:

- 1. Freire's teaching philosophy and how to apply it to foreign language teaching.*
- 2. Activity with the participants. This activity is divided into three steps:*
 - 2.1. Listening: the facilitator produces a code and participants derive generative words from it.*
 - 2.2. Dialogue based on the previously defined generative theme.*
 - 2.3. Action: as the activity is based on the existence of a "problem", participants are encouraged to propose solutions.*
- 3. Participants, in groups, elaborate an activity.*

1. Freire's Teaching Philosophy

The facilitator conducted a workshop wherein problem-posing approach (Paulo Freire 1972, 1973) was applied. The key elements of this approach are: generative words, dialogue, thematic breakdown, and codification.

Through dialogue students are encouraged to connect their personal problems to larger social conditions. A teacher structures a specialized form of dialogue in which students are encouraged to: (1) identify a problem in their personal lives, (2) understand that the problem is shared by classmates, (3) connect these personal problems to social conditions, (4) action: some kind of activity.

Once the problem has been identified the teacher produces a physical representation: a code, a device which is emotionally laden and identifiable to students.

In Freire's work, critical literacy is linked to critical understanding and critical consciousness towards action. The key elements in his approach are: generative words located in people's surroundings, dialogue, thematic breakdown and codification.

The first step in problem-posing approach refers to generative words and generative themes: they are neither in a world separated from people nor in the people isolated from the world. This means that the generative word/theme can only be derived from the relationship

people/world.

The second step is the codification of the word/theme/problem. Such codification should represent situations known by the people/students so that they can easily recognize them. The codification should be neither too explicit nor too enigmatic. In the first case it would easily be confused with propaganda, in the second case it would become a riddle. The basic requirement for codification is to be modest and at the same time be complex so as to invite multiple interpretations. The codification can be simple (use only one channel: visual channel, auditive channel, tactile channel) or compound (use multiple channels). The codification of a situation wherein students/people recognize themselves as part of it leads them into dialogue and to express what they really feel.

Voice is a key element in dialogue. Related to this there are three aspects to be considered (Bailey 1996): gaining the floor, speaking acceptably, and being heard by others. Gaining the floor refers to chance for speaking in front of others and with others, shifts in conversation, voluntary participation. Speaking acceptably refers to the fact that the speaker speaks in an understandable way and demonstrates that he/she has something worth saying. Being heard by others: this means that the dialogue, to be authentic, has to include tricks by which participants show that they are paying attention and valuing the others' talk. Expressions such as "That's a good idea", "What do you mean by ...?" are highly appreciated and worth being used.

The third step is decodification and thematic breakdown. This point refers to splitting a theme into its fundamental components and nuclei: deriving and analyzing related words, expressions and sentences. This cannot be done from top down, but only from the inside out: from the student with the collaboration of the educator.

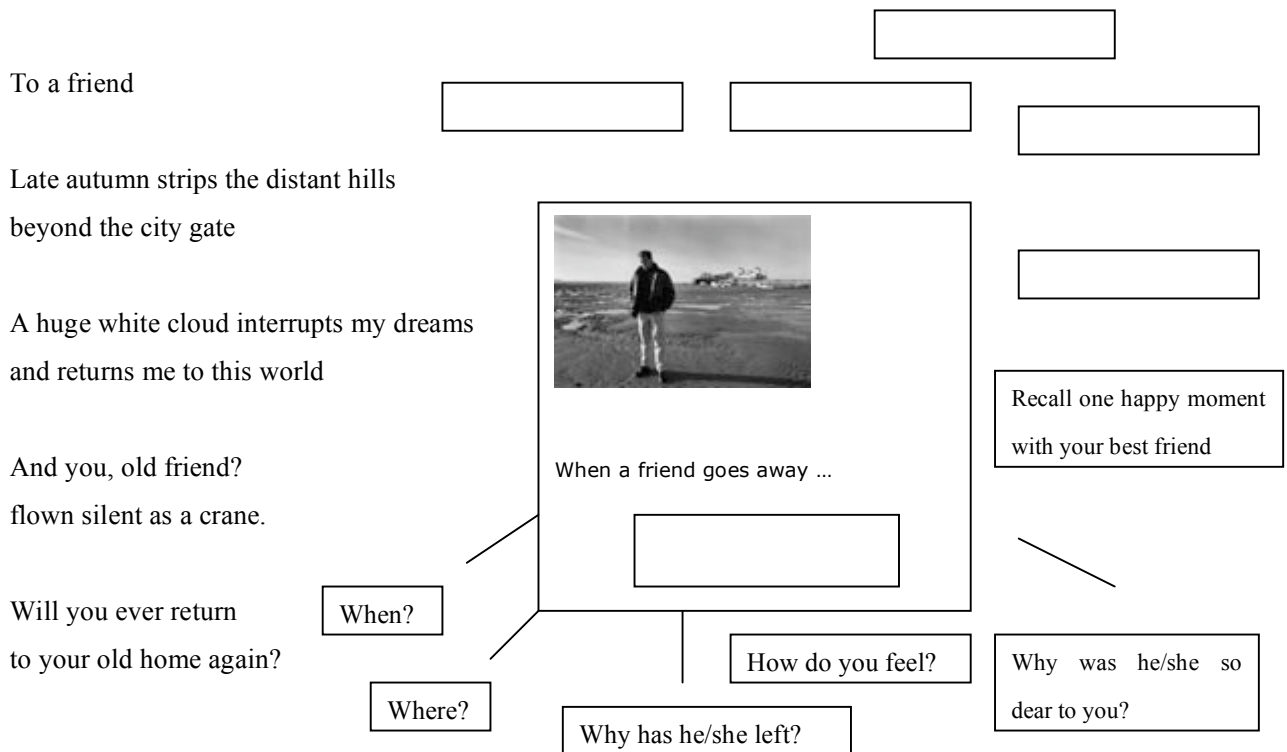
The purpose of the Problem Posing Approach is to create a context in which participants can interact through a Listening, Dialogue, Action format.

2. Activity with the participants

Activity for Beginners

Friends

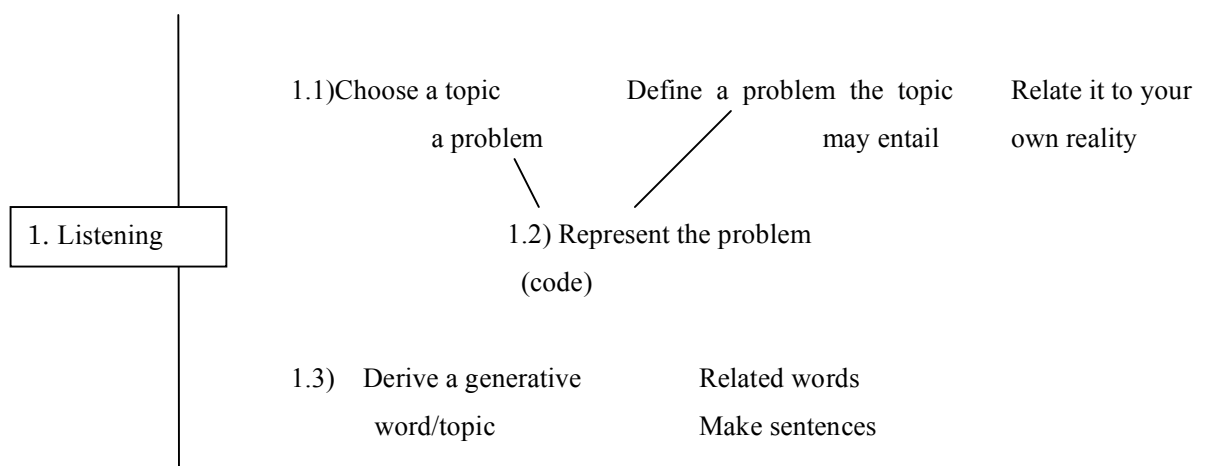
1. Listening. Code: poem "To a friend". Define a problem. Derive: generative word / key word and related words.



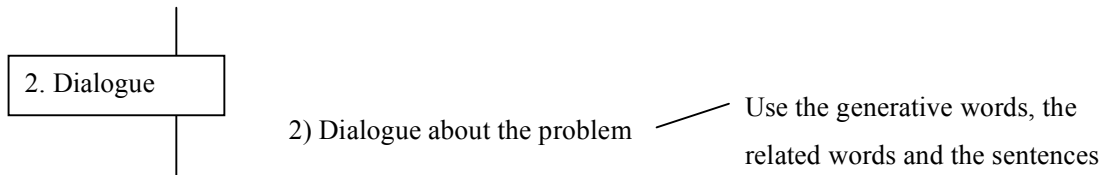
2. Dialogue: use the problem as a theme and the generative/key words as tools.

3. Action. How about writing a letter, or an e-mail, or make a phone call to a friend you have not seen for a long time?

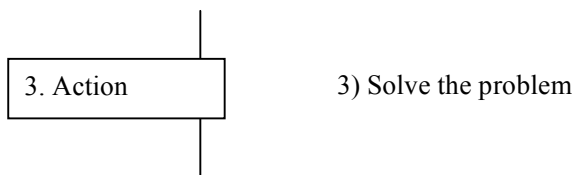
Structure of Problem Posing Approach in Language Teaching



The Listening section may include activities which encourage students to focus on the theme and content being addressed. In case of beginners, it is advisable to start with a mapping and play with words. In case of intermediate and advanced students, they should have adequate lexical tools enough for expressing opinions or replying to questions. However, mapping is always useful so as to split the “problem” into “components”. This section may also include a listening comprehension activity.

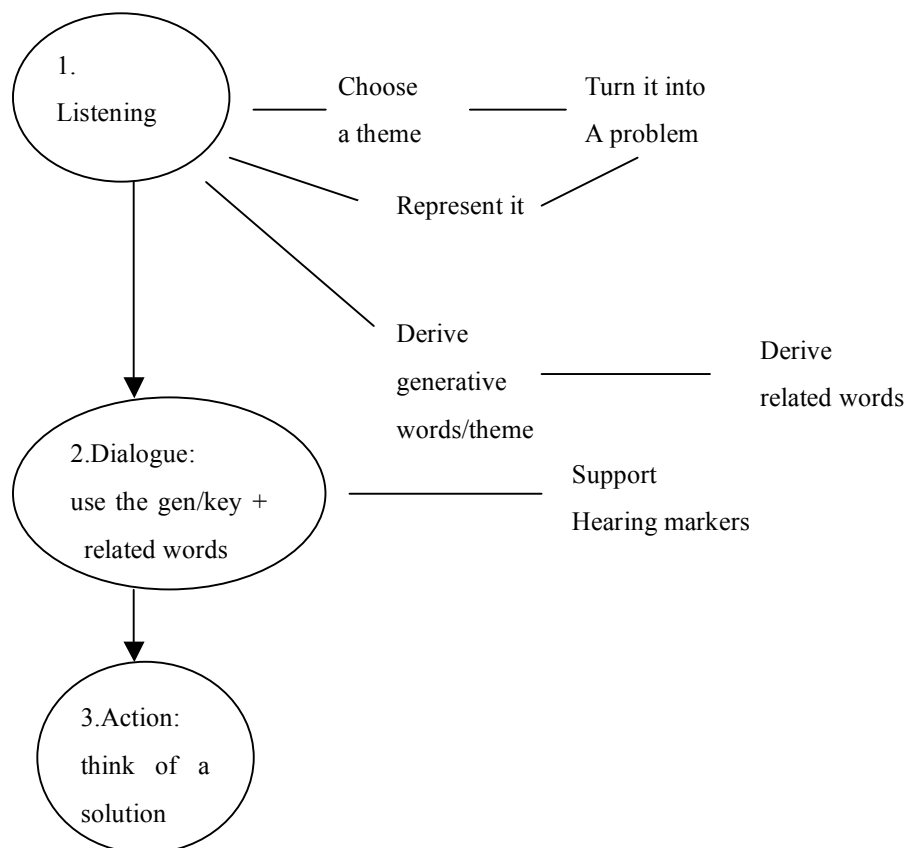


The Dialogue section may include a discussion with a class member, or a small group. In case of beginners, it is advisable to give them some hints for building the dialogue. For instance, we could make this activity to practice “asking and giving opinions”: What do you think about?, or to practice “agreement and disagreement”. It is also advisable to furnish students with some “hearing markers”: “Your idea is really nice”, “What do you mean by ...?”



The Action section may include opportunities for learners for further reflection and investigation and we could think of a writing activity.

3. Participants elaborate an activity with the structure indicated below



Conclusions

This presentation was intended as an example of how Freire's problem posing approach could be applied in foreign language teaching. The classroom work, materials, and topic should be adapted to the level, needs, and interests of the students.

References

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