

My World in a suitcase: multiple ways of enhancing interaction and developing speaking skills using authentic resources

My World in a suitcase: diversas maneiras de aumentar a interação e desenvolver habilidades de fala usando materiais autênticos

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1. Introduction

In terms of teaching resources, one of the beliefs of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is that materials influence the quality of classroom interaction and language use (Richards & Rodgers, 2005) and as such, should be carefully selected.

From the CLT perspective, one criterion for material selection is that its primary role must be the promotion of communication, and according to Richards & Rodgers (2005), there are three types of language teaching materials: a) text-based materials; b) task-based materials; and c) realia.

There are many ways in which authentic resources – realia – can be used in English Language Teaching (ELT). There are also many purposes and situations. This work involves two situations (zero class and grammar practice/review) in which authentic resources can be used in task-based language practice through an activity I have named *My World in a Suitcase*.

My World in a Suitcase is an activity in which the teacher brings objects from her/his traveling experiences, all stored in a mini-suitcase, and learners interact with the resources while using the target language to find out about such experiences. The objects in the mini-suitcase represent experiences the teacher has had, and constitute realia because they are not “artificially” produced for pedagogical purposes.

This activity aims at getting students talking about the objects, in order to find out where these items are from and how they are related to the teacher and her/his traveling experiences. The students must then communicate their predictions by asking the teacher questions about the objects and her/his traveling experiences. The teacher answers the questions and asks students about their own experiences.

Language-wise, *My World in a Suitcase* targets the practice/review of the appropriate linguistic tenses – present perfect and simple past – that would naturally be used when talking about traveling experiences.

We will now look more closely at each of the features of *My World in a Suitcase*.

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2. Activity framework

Title: <i>My World in a Suitcase: using authentic resources to develop speaking skills</i>
Level: pre-intermediate and upwards
Audience: mainly teenagers and adults
Teaching situation: <ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Zero class✓ Grammar/review of present perfect and simple past
Material: a passport, currencies from other countries (bills and/or coins), mini-guides or photos of a city's tourist attraction or an iconic place, bus/subway tickets from other countries, receipts from sightseeing tours, exotic objects and souvenirs purchased abroad etc. A mini-suitcase in which to store all the objects.
Time: 20-25min or more, depending on how the group/students respond

3. Objectives

My World in a Suitcase can be used in a number of different situations. I will describe two teaching situations in which it can be used in Section 4.

The general objective of the activity, regardless of the teaching situation, is to develop speaking skills through interaction, in a relaxed, low-anxiety situation and in a meaningful, dynamic way.

The specific objectives of the activity depend on the teaching situation, but overall *My World in a Suitcase* specifically aims at a) practicing/reviewing the present perfect and simple past tenses, alternating between both in a similar-to-real-life communicative situation; and b) enhancing interaction among students and between students and teacher.

Naturally, such objectives may be more or less developed throughout the activity depending on the teaching situation. In Section 4 we will look more closely at how these goals can be achieved in applying *My World as Suitcase* as a zero class activity, and as grammar practice/review of the present perfect and the simple past tenses.

4. Activity development

4.1 Zero Class

For a zero class, *My World in a Suitcase* works as an ice-breaker so students can get to know the teacher in an interesting, dynamic and communicative way. In this case, the teacher should provide students with as little information as s/he can and let the learners figure out by themselves, as a group, what exactly the objects are and where they are from. Students should be provided with either bilingual or monolingual dictionaries in case they need to look up a word for a particular object.

The teacher should give learners space and time so they can work together and interact in the target language while inspecting and making predictions/conclusions about the resources. The role of the teacher in this case would be “group process manager” (Richards & Rogers, 2005) as s/he monitors and observes students.

It’s important to mention that for a zero class, the focus of this activity is not accuracy, but rather the development of interaction and the practice of speaking skills in a low-anxiety situation. *On-point error correction should not be sought*, but the teacher should silently assess students’ speaking abilities, grammar and vocabulary.

Ideally, students should use the present perfect and the simple past tenses, but it is OK if don’t, as the main objective of *My World in a Suitcase* as a zero class activity is getting students to know about the teacher in order to build rapport, as well as to foster interaction among students.

If students do use these tenses, which is expected in more advanced levels, this is a good opportunity for practice as it is for the teacher to informally assess the students’ linguistic performance.

4.2 Grammar practice/review

My World in a Suitcase can be extremely helpful when dealing with the present perfect and simple past tenses, as it engages students in a meaningful, similar-to-real-life, communicative situations in which such tenses are naturally used.

This activity tackles the linguistic as well as the pragmatic dimensions of language learning, because it requires from learners the ability to ask – and as the activity unfolds, to talk – about traveling experiences using appropriate linguistic structures and discourse strategies. We will focus on the linguistic aspect of the activity.

When it comes to the aforementioned tenses, Thornbury (2002) explains that the present perfect is the tense to be used when talking about travel experiences (“experiential perfect”, p.

210) and personal information (“perfect of persistent situation”, p. 210). These are two of the uses of the present perfect tense, and in realistic conversations about life and about traveling experiences, it is such tense that would realistically be used.

The simple past usually follows the present perfect when talking about experiences, as it is used for providing “precise circumstantial detail about an event” (Parrott, 2003:185), and establishes the time frame of events in telling stories and describing what happened in past (Parrott, 2003), as speakers normally do when talking about traveling experiences.

Following the principles of CLT, both fluency and accuracy should be evaluated. The teacher is advised not to interrupt her/his students, unless they are not using the present perfect and the simple past tenses, which would defeat the purpose of the activity. For the practice/review of grammar through speaking and interaction, *My World in a Suitcase* is as much a fluency-based activity as it is an accuracy-based activity.

As suggested in Larsen-Freeman (2000), evaluation of CLT-principled activities can be formal or informal. As students work together, the teacher can take (mental) notes of linguistic gaps/errors for later commentary should s/he find it necessary. I suggest an informal, gentle evaluation of students’ performance and language use during students’ interaction with the whole class and the teacher.

The role of the teacher in this situation is that of a facilitator. As a review or extra practice of the perfect and past tenses, the teacher *must give clear directions as to what’s expected from the students in term of language use.*

As already pointed out, this activity can be used with small/large groups, as well as in one-to-one lessons. If the absence of student interaction is one of the downsides of one-to-one lessons, the plus side of using *My World in a Suitcase* in such teaching situations is that it gives individual learners more opportunities to add their experiences to the process, something that may not be entirely possible with groups due to time constraints.

The time frame for *My World in a Suitcase* is about 20-25 minutes depending on how learners respond and interact with the resources and use the appropriate language to learn about the teacher’s traveling experiences. In some cases, this activity can be stretched to what Thornbury calls “free-flowing conversation” (p. 262), as it can generate spontaneous discussions about the teacher’s as well as the students’ experiences. This doesn’t necessarily mean that the activity will take up more class time, but it should be noted that depending on the group/students, it may be a good idea to set aside an additional 5 minutes for extra speaking practice.

I have experienced Thornbury’s “free-flowing conversation” mostly with my adult learners, as traveling plays an important role in their professional lives and class time management generally allows for such practices. In some one-to-one lessons (and also with very small groups – up to 3 students, to be more exact) *My World in a Suitcase* may have taken up to

35-40 minutes class time, and learners voluntarily recounted some of their traveling experiences, both professional and personal.

I regard this as an excellent outcome, as spontaneous conversation has been regarded as quite difficult to master (Richards, 2002), whether in Business English or in General English learning, and enhanced interaction between students and teacher can improve students' motivation in using the language more spontaneously.

5. My World in a Suitcase

Pre-task:

The items in the mini-suitcase *should include some form of authentic language material*, a concert ticket or a mini-travel guide, for example, so as to optimize language exposure and so that students can, even if briefly, be introduced to language used in real contexts. But the *teacher should first consider the main objective of the activity and the level of the students*. For a lower level group of students, “realia that do not contain a lot of language” can be used (Larsen-Freeman, 2000:133).

Warm-up:

The teacher asks students if they like to travel, how often they travel, why and where to. This should take about 1-2min. The teacher then tells students s/he loves to travel and shows students the mini-suitcase, explaining that it contains many objects from her/his trips around the world. S/he then asks each student to take one item from the mini-suitcase.

Instructions:

- Teacher explains that students will be working in groups/pairs to examine the objects and try to find out where they are from, which place they represent. S/he explains that *students must work together to come up with questions about the objects, about the teacher's past traveling experiences*. The teacher clarifies that these objects and the questions will be shared with the class.
- The teacher divides the class in smaller groups, if working with large groups, or in pairs, if working with small groups. In one-to-one lessons, the student can work directly with the teacher. *Directions should be given in the target language* and the teacher should check understanding before proceeding. Depending on the size of the group this stage can take up to 3 minutes.

Group work:

After students are grouped/paired up, they examine the objects from the mini-suitcase and *must work collaboratively using the target language*. While analyzing the objects, they *should make predictions and discuss them as a group*. Students are likely to say “This is from England”, “She bought/got this in New York”, or “She went to Australia”. The teacher should allow 5-8 minutes for student interaction, and *should inform or remind students of this time frame*. This is the student-student interaction stage.

Feedback:

Groups/pairs show the objects to the other students, stating what the objects are and asking the teacher questions such as “Have you ever been to England?”, “When did you go to England?” or “Where did you buy this?” if they come across a key chain from London, for example. Other possible questions are: “How many times have you been to England?”, “How did you like it?”, “Have you returned there since (year X)?”, and so forth. This stage may take another 5-8 minutes, depending on the class size and how students respond to the objects. This is the students-teacher interaction stage.

Conclusion:

The teacher returns the questions to the students, asking them about their traveling experiences. It is now time for the students to recount experiences, even if briefly. Once again, students are expected to alternate between the present perfect and the simple past. The conclusion may take 5min and is the teacher-student interaction stage.

6. Final comments

My World in a Suitcase is highly communicative, as its main objective is the development of speaking skills through interaction by engaging learners in communication related to real-life situations, thus generating interest and meaningful speaking practice.

Regarding the theme *My World in a Suitcase* encompasses, it should be added that, in a globalized world, traveling experiences have become a recurrent subject in (international) communication, whether more formal or more casual, and learners will invariably face interaction in which these are center topics.

Furthermore, as the activity was initially conceived as group work, one of its expected outcomes is the enhancement of interaction among students and, finally, between students and teacher. By learning more about the teacher, the activity also targets at building a good relationship between teacher and students.

Finally, as shown, there are many ways in which *My World in a Suitcase* can be used. I have presented two situations, but I am sure creative teachers will find others and will hopefully personalize this activity to meet their students' needs.

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Attachment

Authentic resources from my trips abroad.

Photos by Paula Bainha (pbainha@gmail.com)

