

True or false?

Mario Rinvoluceri finds fact versus fiction fascinating.

For the most part, autistic people do not lie successfully as it seems that this human talent depends on the ability to put yourself in another person's shoes, the ability to see the world, at least to some small extent, from their point of view. Seamless lying is a highly-developed performance skill and the whole area of truth and falsehood fascinates people, especially teenagers. I am not sure why it generates so much interest among teenagers. Is it because they are changing so fast from day to day that what is real for them merges imperceptibly with what is unreal? Is it because identity evolution in the teenage years blurs the distinction between fact and fiction?

Fact or fabrication?

One of the first people I know to have used the truth/falsehood continuum in language teaching, is Andrew Wright, the great ELT teller of stories. This is an activity I learnt from him.

- Set your students an essay title for homework.
- Tell them to include three statements in the essay that are false.
- In the next lesson, group your students in threes and ask them to read each other's texts and to ferret out the bits that are untrue. Allow time for discussion in the threesomes.

This activity is, in my view, a simple and brilliant way of providing the essay writers with interested readers, even if neither writer nor reader has a strong investment in the subject under discussion. The technique is particularly handy in the run-up to an exam as you may feel forced to set the students the type of hackneyed topic they will have to write about on the day.

Faithful or fraudulent?

The next activity I want to offer you is one I have done frequently in joint training sessions with Herbert Puchta.

It is a generic activity that can be done repeatedly with different topics. Did Herbert learn it from me or did I learn it from him? The answer is lost in the mists of time.

- Group the students in threes and ask them to decide who is A, who is B and who is C.
- Ask all the A students to describe a recent holiday. Tell them that they are to tell lies and nothing but lies. (The whole class hears this instruction to the A students.) Explain that they have 90 seconds lying time. (Time the 90 seconds truthfully!)
- Ask the B students also to describe a recent holiday but to tell the truth for 90 seconds.
- Finally ask the C students to describe a recent holiday but mixing truth and lies, 50:50. Again, give them 90 seconds.
- Allow time for the listeners to winnow out the truth from the C students' mixture of fact and fiction.

Love it or leave it?

Knowing when there is genuine emotion behind the words you hear is part of inter-personal intelligence and is also part of really understanding something in a second language. In the activity that follows, the learners read two interviews. In one, the interviewee describes a film he loves and in the other, a film he is indifferent to. In both cases the interviewee describes the films positively. The positivity is genuine in one case but not in the other. You may wonder how students can tell which is which without hearing the interview as so much of our interpretation of people's feelings comes from intonation, stress, speed of delivery, tone of voice, etc. The variation described below gives you the opportunity to exploit these features of spoken discourse. However, even from the bare written text, it is clear that the second interview is about the film that he loves because of the use

of the present tense and the waterfall rhythm of thoughts and words.

- Tell the class you are going to give them two interview transcripts in which a BBC presenter from the 1980s, Robin Day, praises two films. His praise for one film is heart-felt, while with the other film he is faking it.
- Give them the two interviews (see the box on page 9) to read, and group them in fours to discuss which is genuine.
- In a whole-class discussion, ask for their views. (You may want to tell them that *Some Like it Hot* is the film Robin Day actually likes. Some teachers prefer to avoid this type of closure and withhold the information.)

Why only give the students third-party interviews? You, their teacher, will interest them much more than any BBC presenter from the 1980s could. Try this version of the same activity.

- Ask a student to interview you about two countries, two people, two books, two towns, etc, one of which you really like and one that you are indifferent to.
- As the student asks you questions, try to hide your preference by trying to praise both equally. The person interviews you first about one of the pair and then, separately, about the other.
- Ask the students to discuss the two interviews and decide where your preference lies.
- Ask individual students to explain to the group what they base their guesses on: words, voice, the look on your face, things they already know about you, etc.
- Ask the class to vote, then tell them which of the two you really like. Do this truthfully!

This is a powerful listening activity in the course of which the students are listening to the whole message, not simply to the words in the target

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Interviewer So, Sir Robin, what's your favourite film?

Day *Gone with the Wind*.

Interviewer And why's that?

Day Oh, it's, it, it's a classic. Great characters, great film star – Clark Gable; a great actress: Vivien Leigh, very moving.

Interviewer And who's your favourite character in it?

Day Oh, Gable.

Interviewer And how many times have you seen it?

Day Um, I think about half a dozen.

Interviewer And when was the first time you saw it?

Day When it first came out. I think that was in about 1939.

2

Interviewer So, Sir Robin, what's your favourite film?

Day Ah, er, *Some Like it Hot*.

Interviewer And why do you like that?

Day Oh, because it gets funnier every time that I see it. There are all sorts of bits in it that I love. And I like them more each time that I see it.

Interviewer Who's your favourite character in it?

Day Oh, Tony Curtis, I think. He's so pretty ... and he's so witty, and he mimics Cary Grant so well and he's very funny the way he tries to resist being seduced by Marilyn Monroe.

Interviewer And when was the first time you saw it?

Day I think when it came out and I forget when that was.

language. Compare the power of this kind of listening with the anodyne nature of much coursebook listening.

Incident or invention?

Let us move on to another excellent listening activity. To prepare for this, you need to pick two real incidents from your childhood and mentally prepare to tell them very briefly. Restrict yourself to 90 seconds. Also concoct a fictitious incident occurring during the same period of your childhood.

- Explain to the students that you are going to tell them three brief personal stories, two will be true and one will be invented. Their task is to decide which is which.
- Tell your first story in 90 seconds and allow the students 45 seconds' reaction time to talk about it in pairs.

- Tell your second story and third stories, each time in 90 seconds and giving the students 45 seconds' reaction time.
- Now group the students in fours and ask them to decide which story is invented.
- Have a whole-class discussion in which the students tell each other what they think and why.
- Tell them which is the invented story.

A rather wicked variation on the above technique is to tell three true stories about your childhood but with the instructions as in the activity above! I have yet to meet a class that does not enjoy this type of activity.

Dream or reality?

A good friend of mine, the late Chris Sion, used to do the following activity with his students.

- Send one student out of the room.
- Tell the others that you are all going to pretend that you know a dream the student outside the room had last night but which they have forgotten, as one often does.
- Explain that the student will be told to ask the class *yes/no* questions. If the question ends in a consonant the class must chorus *Yes*, if it ends in a vowel they must chorus *No*. (Many different systems can be used besides the consonant/vowel one outlined here.)
- Call the student back in and explain about their 'dream'. Tell the student to start asking the class *yes/no* questions to find out about this dream.
- The activity ends when the questioning student discovers the system being used in giving answers.

Correct or concocted?

Have you ever got your students playing *Bluffing definitions*? This is, I believe, a pretty well-known ELT activity that is based on playful deception.

- Give your students three definitions of a word or phrase they are unlikely to know. Here is an example:

TO GO DUTCH

Definition 1: After a restaurant meal each person pays for what they ate.

Definition 2: To flatten out the ground before, for example, building an airport.

Definition 3: To show false bravery after getting drunk.

(Definition 1 is correct.)

- Ask the students to work in threes and decide which is the correct definition.
- Reveal the answer, and then ask pairs of students to prepare two false definitions, and one true definition as above, for a hard word, which they can choose from the dictionary.
- Tell the pairs to exchange their sets of definitions. They now have to decide which of the definitions they have been given is the correct one. (Don't allow them to use dictionaries at this stage.)
- Ask the students to check their answers with those who wrote the definitions.

My best lie

I am well aware that there are some countries in the world where it will be acceptable to invite students to talk about their own lying and others where this is a taboo subject. However, this activity has worked well for me.

- Bring to mind two really good lies you have told in your life – this could be the way you pulled the wool over your parents' eyes when you were little; it could be a successful April Fool story you concocted; or maybe a specious 'no homework' excuse; or whatever else comes to your mind.
- Tell the first story to your students.
- Ask them to prepare to tell the story of a successful lie they once told. Tell them to listen to your second lie story, but to be thinking about a lie of their own at the same time.
- Group the students in sixes to tell each other the stories of their best lie.



Having come with me through the text thus far, can you understand why the area of fact versus fiction, truth versus untruth, veracity versus deception is of such immense interest to human beings across cultures? The word *liar* in English is quite a powerful one. How strong is the corresponding word in *your culture*? **ETP**



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