Surrealist Room: Practice with Clarification Questions for Negotiating Meaning
Kenny Harsch

Source: Inspired by Activity 12, "Pardon?", in Dornyei & Thurrell (1992).

Teaching Context:
Location: Any
Age Groups: Any
Levels: Mid-beginner and up

Aims/Objectives: Introduce students to a variety of phrases they can use to ask for clarification, and provide meaningful practice using those phrases (and other phrases that they may be familiar with. Help students realize that they can be active listeners, depending on the communicative situation.

Outcomes: After completing this activity, students will be able to
- use comprehension questions to negotiate meaning in communicative interactions
- recognize and state the value of being able to negotiate meaning as part of being an effective GE user

Assumptions about what students already know: Students should have already learned about prepositions of location (e.g., in front of, next to on the left side, on top of).

Class Time: 50-60 minutes

Teacher Preparation Time: 5-10 minutes to make photocopies of the handouts

Resources Required: Handouts: "Phrases for asking for clarification" (Appendix A), Sheet of empty rooms (Appendix B).

How does this lesson incorporate a GE focus? Students discuss (or review) the GE concept of cooperative communication, and that interactional strategies can help them to accommodate other users as well as get accommodation from others. Asking for clarification is one strategy that is part of negotiation of meaning. Negotiation has been found to be valuable for language learning (Long, 1981, 1996), and is also a very important skill for cooperatively communicating in global contexts (Galloway & Rose, 2015).

Procedure:

- Give students the list of clarification questions (Appendix A) and review each question with them to make sure they understand how to use it. Use a few sample sentences where you mumble (e.g., "*Yesterday I went shopping at mmmhhmhmhm*") to push the students to ask for clarification (e.g., "*Where did you go shopping?*" or "*You went shopping where?*")
- Introduce (or review) the GE concept of cooperative communication, and that an important part of this is the ability to accommodate others and gain others' accommodation. Then put students into small groups and ask them to briefly discuss how being comfortable with asking for clarification can help them to participate more fully in communication on a global basis. After a few minutes, ask groups to share one of the points that came up in their discussions.

- Pass out the handout with three blank rooms (Appendix B). Draw the same room on the board, and point out the left-side wall, back wall, and floor.
- Let them know they're going to practice prepositions of location. Let them know that you are going to describe things in the room, and their job is to draw a picture of everything you describe. If they get it 100% correct, they get a grade of 'A', but anything less than 100% is a grade of 'F'…. BUT they can ask as many clarification questions as they'd like.
- Proceed with describing the things in the room, being appropriately merciless for the level of English of the group, forcing them to ask for clarification. Here is a sample description:
    - In the back right corner, there's a TV on the floor.
    - On top of the TV is a piano…
    - and there's a pencil case on top of the piano
    - To the left of the piano, hanging from the ceiling, is a low table, …
    - with a notebook under it …
    - and the notebook is holding a ruler in its left hand.
    - On the back wall, on the left side of the room, there's a window.
    - [famous person the students would know] is standing outside the window, looking in
    - She's wearing a "I ♡ [your city or school]" t-shirt and is waving her right hand
    - In the front left corner, there's a cat facing the middle of the room
    - The cat has a baseball bat in its mouth, …
    - and is kicking a bicycle toward the middle of the room
- Ask if everyone is confident of getting 100%. If not, allow them to ask additional clarification questions. Once they feel confident, quickly draw the items on the board and ask them to check their results.
- Give students time to draw their own weird, surrealist room in the middle room of the handout. You may want to also have them write the description of where each item is, so that they can easily describe their room to a partner.
- Put students in pairs, and have them take turns describing what's in their room and drawing what they hear (asking for clarification as needed).
- Post-activity reflection. Put students into small groups and have them reflect on this activity. Ask them to share what was easy and difficult about asking clarification questions, if they used any phrases that were different from those provided in the handout, and any other reflections they would like to share that relate to being an effective GE user.

Caveats and Options: If homework is an option for your class, you could introduce your surrealist room at the end of one class period, and then have the students draw their own surrealist room and description as homework for the next class.

References and Further Reading:

Dornyei, Z. and Thurrell, S. (1992). *Conversations and dialogues in action*. London: Prentice Hall International.

Galloway, N. & Rose, H. (2015). *Introducing global Englishes*. New York: Routledge.

Long, M. H. (1981). Input, interaction, and second language acquisition. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 379, 259-278.

Long, M. H. (1996). The role of linguistic environment in second language acquisition. In W. Ritchie and T. K. Bhatia (Eds.), *Handbook of second language acquisition* (pp. 413-468). San Diego: Academic Press.

Assessment Guidelines and Rubric: The grading of this activity (A for a perfectly accurate drawing, and F for anything less than perfect) is only an incentive to get students to ask a lot of clarification questions. This activity does not need to be graded. However, having a reflection task at the end may be valuable for helping students to connect the activity with effective GE use.

Appendix A

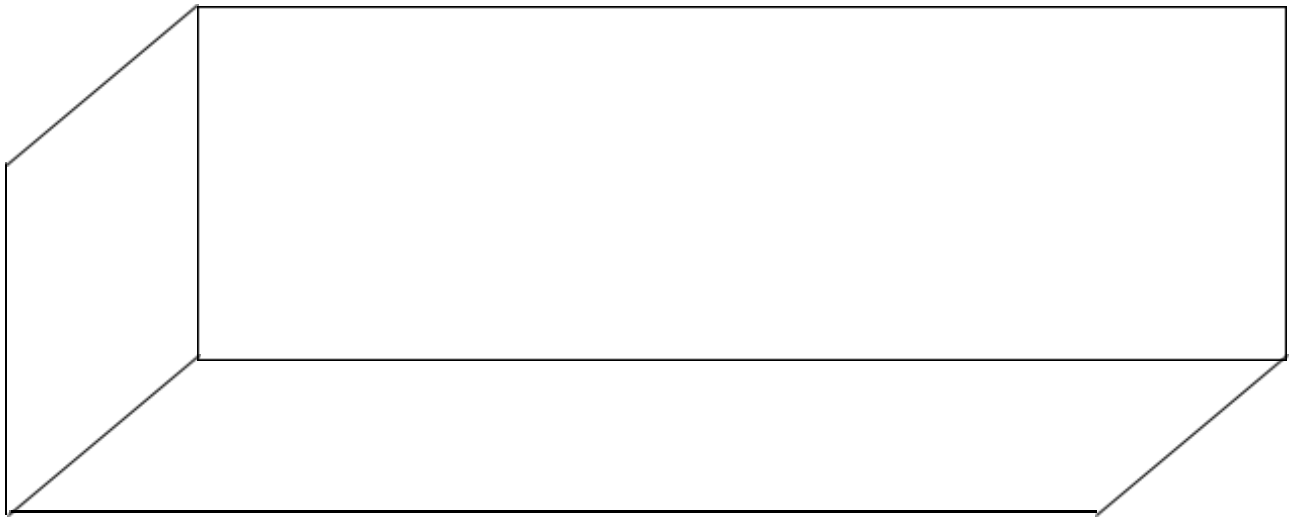
Phrases for asking for clarification

Sorry, I didn't hear that. Could you say it again, please?
What was xxx [that word/the first word/his name/the last sentence] again?
Did you say xxx [a guitar / the post office / 8 o'clock pm]?
You did what?
You went where?
Who did you say you saw?
Could you spell that for me?
Did you say it's [on the left side of/on the right side of/on top of/under] xxx?
What do you mean by xxx
What did you say before xxx?
What did you say after xxx?
What did you say you did?

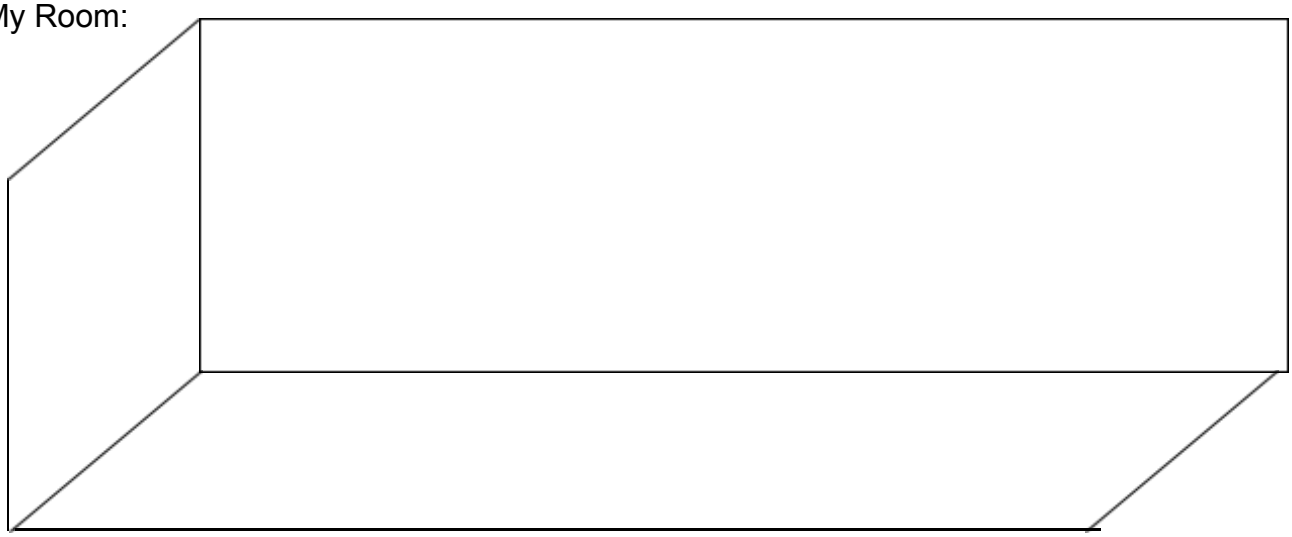
These phrases come from a version of English used by the author of this activity. However, there may be many other ways of asking for clarification – perhaps some that you use, or others that you hear used by other people from around the world. All of these ways of using English to gain understanding are equally valid.

Appendix B

My Teacher's Room:



My Room:



My Partner's Room:

