

Evaluating Speaking Skills in the Classroom: A Workshop for Teachers

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ABSTRACT *This workshop, which originated as part of a teacher-training program at the University of Tennessee and was presented at the Tennessee Foreign Language Teacher Association's Conference in the fall of 1985, is intended to help teachers establish goals and guidelines for assigning the "class participation" portion of a student's grade. The principal motive behind the workshop is to make teachers more aware of the need to set standards for oral proficiency in the classroom, to conduct their classes in such a way as to promote maximum oral participation by students, and to be as objective as possible in assigning class participation grades. It is not intended to solve the problems inherent in evaluating oral proficiency in the classroom setting, but merely to guide teachers in defining and formulating the standards by which students' performance is to be assessed.*

technique to the increased use of communicative activities in many foreign language programs around the country.

A great deal has been said about the need to establish suitable guidelines for testing students' oral proficiency, and the "ACTFL Provisional Proficiency Guidelines" represent an effort to standardize testing nationwide (1). These guidelines are extremely helpful but, in order to be put into use, they require that each individual student be tested in a formal interview situation by a trained evaluator. This type of oral testing has become an integral part of the course structure in some programs; in others, it remains an impossible task because of the number of students involved, the lack of time on the part of the instructors, and the lack of experience or training among those who would be required to do the evaluating. At any rate, the formal test is not the only tool available to teachers who wish to evaluate their students' oral ability. The classroom situation can also provide ample opportunity to assess communication skills (See Larson, 2). Most teachers, in fact, determine a percentage of each student's final class grade by assigning a "class participation grade," which is usually in some way related to the student's performance in class. This grade, which affects every student in a tangible way, has seldom come under the same close scrutiny as the formal oral test. In many cases, "class participation" has become a catch-all phrase that amounts to little more than a subjective evaluation of a student's overall performance in the classroom. Factors such as attendance, attitude, and personal conduct are sometimes considered side-by-side with the student's ability to speak and understand the language. The first step in making the "class participation grade" a more meaning-

Students in the foreign language classroom today are, for the most part, no longer satisfied with learning how to conjugate verbs. Even when their principal motivation for taking the class is to fulfill a graduation requirement, they want to feel that they are acquiring skills which will be useful to them in "real life." In exchange for the year or two of study which they devote to studying a foreign language, they expect to be able to *communicate* in that language. Teachers generally agree that the ability to communicate is an important goal in the classroom, and some have begun to rethink their methods of teaching and testing in recent years. Emphasis has shifted from the traditional grammar-translation

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ful evaluation process, then, is to separate *oral communication skills* from other *class work*, and to arrive at two different, independent grades for each student. The need for guidelines in this area is urgent and real, but it has not attracted our immediate attention because the class participation grade has long been an accepted part of our traditional class structure. Most of us probably think we know what we are evaluating when we assign this grade; yet, when we are pressed to define it in exact terms, we find that we are not totally sure of its meaning. Certainly in any program with more than one teacher, there would be variation in the grading scale, and students moving from one teacher to another would be unsure of the standards to be used in evaluating their performance in class.

Because each language program has its own goals, its own norms, and its own character, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to establish a set of national guidelines which would be acceptable to all. It is not unreasonable, however, to expect individual teachers within a given program to be able to reach an agreement about the meaning of the class participation grade and the values assigned to it in their own program. This step would ensure uniformity from one class to another and bring a measure of objectivity to an otherwise subjective grading system. Furthermore, such agreement would provide individual teachers with a meaningful system of reference which would allow them to evaluate every student's performance in a consistent and fair way and to verbalize evaluative criteria when asked to do so by the students. A framework of this type would be especially desirable in a program where many of the instructors are inexperienced or new to the classroom, such as in a university program employing a large number of graduate student assistants. A move toward standardization in the evaluation of speaking skills in the classroom would eliminate some of the haphazard grading procedures that have occasionally plagued students in the past.

How can standardization be achieved? The creation of a workable set of guidelines is the obvious answer, providing that these guidelines truly reflect the goals, aspirations, and values of those teaching in the program. The development of guidelines should be the result of an open discussion and, if possible, a common experience which can provide concrete examples of some of the problems to be considered. A workshop format is, perhaps, the best approach to this undertaking since this format involves everyone in an active way and raises many questions which can later be addressed by the vari-

ous participants. The following workshop, originated as part of a teacher-training program at the University of Tennessee and presented at the Tennessee Foreign Language Teaching Association's Conference in the fall of 1985, can be adapted to fit the needs of any program where more than one teacher is involved in the assignment of class participation grades. It can, for example, be offered by the supervisor of first- and second-year language courses at a university for the benefit of teaching assistants; it can be organized as an in-service training workshop for high school teachers within a school system; or it can be a class project for students enrolled in a foreign language education course. The workshop does not attempt to impose a particular set of guidelines on the participants, nor does it provide answers to the questions it raises. Its purpose is to stimulate discussion and to make the participants more aware of the criteria they use when assigning class participation grades. This discussion will lead participants to the creation of a set of guidelines they can use on a daily basis in the classroom, and will ultimately lead to a more uniform and consistent grading system.

Organization of the Workshop

The workshop will take between one and two hours, depending on the length of the mini-class that is presented and the amount of discussion that follows. Another meeting at a later date may be required if the guidelines are to be written by the entire group of participants, or if additional discussion is desirable. Ideally, the workshop will consist of the following: one person to lead discussions and to play the role of the teacher in the mini-class situation; ten people to play the role of students in the mini-class; and some additional people to observe the mini-class and act as commentators. If the group is small, some of the student roles can be eliminated and those who play the role of students can also act as commentators once the role-play situation has ended. Everyone participating in the workshop should be encouraged to take part in the discussion that follows the mini-class.

The workshop has three major parts: presentation, role-play (mini-class), and discussion. At least twenty minutes should be spent on each part, although the mini-class and discussion could easily be longer. The person organizing the workshop should watch the time carefully during the presentation and role-play segments, since it is generally not useful or desirable to extend these activities far beyond the time limit. Ample time and energy should be left for the discus-

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sion at the end, since this is the real objective of the workshop.

Before calling the group together, the organizer of the workshop should prepare several handouts for the participants. The first of these, "Setting Your Standards" (See Appendix A), is designed to stimulate thought about the meaning of the class participation grade. This handout should be distributed at the beginning of the session to all of the workshop participants, who should be encouraged to complete the form without consulting others in the group since, at this stage, the goal is to elicit individual responses. Once participants have completed the form, they should take a moment to study it and note which factors they have ranked most highly. Later, in the role-playing situation, they should keep these factors in mind when assigning grades to the "students" in the mini-class. Comparison and discussion of individual responses should not take place during the early part of the workshop because, in all likelihood, some participants will reevaluate and revise their criteria as they observe the role-play situation and begin to assign class participation grades. The form should be completed, studied, and set aside for the discussion segment at the end of the workshop.

A second handout called "Planning Your Class" (Appendix B) is optional. If the participants in the group are all experienced teachers, and especially if oral communication skills are stressed in all classes as a matter of course, the handout probably will not be necessary. This segment of the workshop could be a brief exchange session, in which all the participants share ideas about ways to incorporate communicative activities into the class plan. If the workshop involves quite a few novice teachers or teachers who do not normally stress oral communication in the classroom, a handout containing practical suggestions would probably be most welcome.

A sample lesson plan should also be prepared in advance and distributed to the participants at the workshop so that the general comments presented above can be seen in a practical application (See Appendix C). Whenever possible, the lesson plan should deal with material that the participants might normally be expected to teach in their own classes. A condensed version of this plan will be used in the role-play situation, which will give the participants a chance to see some of the activities and exercises performed.

Another handout, which is not distributed until the final discussion segment of the workshop, will show participants the grades that "students" in the mini-class are receiving on written work (Appendix

D). The participants should, under no circumstances, see this information until the role-play situation has ended and class participation grades have been assigned. One of the primary goals of the workshop is to make teachers more aware of the need to evaluate oral proficiency in the classroom independently of the student's performance on written work.

Finally, the organizer of the workshop must prepare a description of each student role in the mini-class. This information is given only to the person who will play a particular role, so it is best contained on a 4" x 6" index card or a small piece of paper. Other participants, whether playing roles themselves or acting as commentators, will know nothing about the background of other "students" in the mini-class. It is the goal of each person acting out a role to convey to the others, through his or her behavior, attitude and performance, what type of student he or she represents. All of the roles purposely involve exaggerated stereotypes of students whom we are likely to meet in the classroom. Because they are, in a sense, larger-than-life characters, they underline and point to some specific problems that arise when we try to assign class participation grades to certain types of students. Those who volunteer to play the roles should be free to improvise, but they should try to remain faithful to the general character of the student type they represent. It is necessary that there be some exaggeration involved in the portrayal of these students in order for the observers to get an idea of their strengths and weaknesses in a brief amount of time. It is equally important, however, that the role-play situation not be carried to the level of a meaningless farce. A certain amount of humor will add life and excitement to the workshop, but the participants should remember that their ultimate goal is a serious one (See Appendix E).

Conducting the Mini-Class

Once the lesson plan has been distributed and student roles have been assigned, the organizer of the workshop can set up the mini-class situation. Only a few preliminary words of introduction are necessary. For example, the person in the role of the teacher should explain that the students in the class are used to some established patterns: both the teacher and the students use the foreign language as much as possible, and similar kinds of activities have been done before so that students know how to do drills, work in small groups, and so on. Since this is a mini-class, everything on the lesson plan is abbreviated, and some things are omitted. Normally,

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each activity would be more developed, transitions would be less abrupt, and there would be more students in the class.

Participants (both those playing roles and those observing) will be asked to assign a numerical grade to each student at the end of the class using the following scale:

A+	98	C+	78
A	95	C	75
A-	91	C-	71
B+	88	D+	68
B	85	D	65
B-	81	D-	61
		F	58-0

The grades should be arrived at independently and written down on paper without discussion or consultation. It may be necessary for the students to wear identification tags so the observers can distinguish one from the other. After everyone has assigned grades, the discussion will begin. During the class, everyone should focus on the performance of the students.

Discussion of the Students' Performance

At the end of the mini-class, participants will need a few minutes to evaluate the performance of the students they have observed. Then, the organizer of the workshop should distribute the handout which shows the students' grades on written work (Appendix D). This information has been withheld for a reason. It will probably come as a shock to some participants to see the discrepancy in several cases between written and oral skills. In most real-life situations, a teacher would be aware of the students' written performance on quizzes and exams before he or she had formed a definite opinion of the students' oral skills. Whether we like to admit it or not, we are often influenced by this knowledge and our evaluation of oral skills may unconsciously be linked to the students' written work. The class participation grade may become, then, nothing more than a reflection of the students' grades on written work. A good point of departure for the discussion of the meaning of the class participation grade is to attempt to separate the students' ability to perform on written work from his or her ability to perform orally in class. All of the criteria listed under "Other Factors" on the "Setting Your Standards" worksheet might be used to assign a separate, class work grade. The factors listed under "Oral/Aural Skills" could be used to evaluate oral communication skills, which would represent another category

of performance. The class participation grade could thus be treated as two different, independent grades, and the assessment of oral proficiency in the classroom would become a more clearly defined task.

The participants in the workshop should be redirected to the first handout, "Setting Your Standards," and asked to discuss the value of each of the components of the class participation grade. The group should try to reach an agreement about the numerical value to be assigned to each of the diverse criteria listed on this page, so that the relative importance of each item is accurately represented in the final calculation of the students' grades. Participants should be reminded that they are evaluating only the oral/aural skills of the "students" they have observed in the mini-class. The grades they assign should be for oral communication skills, not for class work or other factors. In a real classroom setting, the teachers would assign a separate grade for class work. Once values have been assigned to the criteria, the evaluation of speaking skills and of class work will become a more effective diagnostic procedure.

The objective of the discussion period is to reach some conclusions about what teachers can realistically expect from their students in terms of oral proficiency, and to formulate a set of guidelines for evaluating oral communication skills in the classroom. These guidelines should reflect the specific character of the program in which the participants are involved. Factors such as the number of students in the class, the contact hours per week, the teaching methods used, the experience of the teaching staff, and the material covered in the course must be taken into consideration. It must also be commonly understood that if students are to be graded on their speaking ability, they must be given ample opportunity to speak. Classes must be conducted in such a way that oral skills are stressed. In some cases, this may mean that teachers will have to reevaluate their methodology, and further workshops may be required to reorient or train them.

Every group who participates in this workshop will probably reach a different set of conclusions, and each set of guidelines which is formulated will reveal different expectations. It is wise to remember, however, that attempts are being made nationwide to standardize the evaluation of oral proficiency, and independent guidelines for classroom use should agree in some measure with national standards. The "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines" may be a good starting point for us all, if we understand that as written, they are not goal statements and that they must serve only as a point of departure for devising our

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own goals in the classroom. For example, at the end of the first semester of a first-year program at the university level, a student who receives the grade of "95" for oral communication skills might be expected to meet the following description:

Student participates in all exercises, responds in choral practice and in individual practice, volunteers to participate in almost every class activity, needs no encouragement to speak when called on. Never uses English when he knows the equivalent expression or word in the foreign language. When following the teacher's model, student almost never makes a mistake. When creating original sentences, there may be some errors, but statement is still comprehensible. Can initiate and respond to simple statements, can formulate some basic questions with a minimum of inaccuracies. Makes a concentrated effort at correct pronunciation, intonation. Minimum of pauses and breaks in simple utterances. Shows an understanding of an ability to use subject-verb agreement for present tense regular verbs, as well as some irregular verbs. Shows some understanding of the differences between *ser* and *estar*, the concept of non-adjective agreement, and the placement of adjectives, although some errors may occur. Has mastered

most *tener* idioms, can tell time, knows days of the week, numbers 1-100, and can discuss in very simple sentences topics related to the university, family, clothing, shopping, and food.

Similar descriptions could be written for the grades of B, C, D, and F.

A written set of guidelines would serve multiple purposes: to provide teachers with concrete descriptions of the values assigned to different letter grades, to ensure uniformity from one section to another, to provide students with a clear notion of what is expected from them, and to eliminate some of the subjectivity which is traditionally associated with the class participation grade. Other factors, such as the student's attitude, attendance record, preparation of homework, lab work, and the like, could be taken into consideration in a separate category, the *class work grade*. *Oral communication skills* would thus become more clearly defined, and the evaluation of oral proficiency in the classroom would be conducted in a more methodical and objective way.

REFERENCES

1. "ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines." *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (1984): 453-59.
2. Larson, Jerry W. "Testing Speaking Ability in the Classroom: the Semi-Direct Alternative." *Foreign Language Annals* 17 (1984): 499-507.

Appendix A Setting Your Standards

Without consulting others in the room, rate the importance of each of the following possible components of the class participation grade. (0—not at all important; 5—very important).

A. Oral/Aural Skills

- _____ pronunciation
- _____ ability to perform well in mechanical drills
- _____ ability to answer personalized questions
- _____ ability to generate original statements or questions
- _____ listening comprehension (does the student show signs of understanding you or others?)
- _____ use of the foreign language to communicate basic ideas or information (does the student use English to express ideas: "I don't know." "Where are we?" "What page?")
- _____ the amount (quantity) of participation
- _____ the appropriateness and correctness (quality) of contributions

B Other Factors

- _____ attendance
- _____ preparation of homework
- _____ pays attention in class
- _____ volunteers to participate (rather than waiting to be called on)

- _____ tries hard
 _____ behaves well in class
 _____ follows instructions

Other: (Please list any factors you take into consideration when assigning the class participation grade and rate the importance of each)

Quickly make a mental note to yourself about what you expect in terms of performance and participation from a student who receives a class participation grade of A, B, C, D, and F. How well do you expect each to handle grammar? How much vocabulary would you expect each to know? What kind and what level of communication skills would you expect from each?

Appendix B Planning Your Class

1. Class time should be spent doing as much oral practice as possible. Textbooks should be closed much of the time.
2. Start with easy, mechanical warm-up exercises, and work progressively toward more challenging activities.
3. Constantly reassess the level of difficulty as you are doing oral exercises. Are they too simple? Too hard? If they are not appropriate, modify them.
4. Provide variety in the types of exercises and in the level of difficulty to keep the pace moving and to prevent boredom.
5. Make sure your instructions are simple and clear, and give models or examples to follow whenever possible. Use the foreign language as much as possible.
6. If your class is large, use choral recitation and drills occasionally to involve all students at once. Also plan some small group activities or work to be done in pairs.
7. Move around the room so students can't always predict when you are going to call on them.
8. Give students a chance to volunteer for some exercises and call on them at other times. Ignore no one.
9. If possible, arrange the seats in a semi-circle so no students are hidden behind others.
10. Reward students with a smile and words of encouragement when they answer correctly. Be considerate and correct them tactfully when they make a mistake. Create an atmosphere in which they aren't afraid to speak.

Appendix C Lesson Plan

for: Spanish 102 (first year, second semester, university level)

Objective: Students will use irregular verbs in the preterite tense in mechanical drills, questions and answers, and original narration.

- I. Review of previously-presented material
 - a. rapid conjugation of regular verbs in the preterite tense
 - b. person-number substitution drill
 - c. present to preterite tense drill
 Format: choral and individual responses, calling on students
- II. Presentation of new material: *ser, ir, decir, hacer* and *estar* in the preterite
 - a. presentation of forms with visual aids and examples
 - b. repetition and recognition of forms
- III. Practice with new material: mechanical drills
 - a. singular to plural form drill
 - b. person-number substitution drill

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- c. listening comprehension: recognition of forms (present and preterite forms)
- d. present to preterite tense drill

Format: choral and individual responses, calling on students and asking for volunteers

IV. Communicative activities (integrate old and new material)

- a. personalized questions, regular and irregular verbs (call on volunteers first)
- b. working in pairs: using dehydrated sentences (*¿ir/cine/anoche?*). Students take turns answering and asking questions.
- c. whole class activity: guided story-telling (*Un viaje magnífico.*) Using pictures and a list of verbs on the board, student volunteers create an original story about an imaginary trip they took. Teacher can ask questions to prompt them.
- d. small group activity: story telling. Using postcards or pictures, each student in the group describes an imaginary trip he or she took. Other students should ask questions and take notes to report back to the class if asked to do so.

Appendix D
Student Grades

name	exam 1	exam 2	quiz avg.	absences	class part.
student 1	70	54	75	0	_____
student 2	98	95	96	2	_____
student 3	28	42	60	8	_____
student 4	95	96	95	1	_____
student 5	76	62	81	9	_____
student 6	85	75	88	3	_____
student 7	73	80	78	1	_____
student 8	30	22	50	7	_____
student 9	89	70	81	2	_____
student 10	90	88	85	3	_____

Appendix E
Student Roles

Student 1

You always take your studies seriously. You spend an hour a day in the lab and you do every exercise in the textbook and workbook before coming to class. You are alert in class and take notes. You volunteer to answer questions and go to the board. You are enthusiastic about the course and want to get an A in it.

Unfortunately, you have a lot of trouble grasping the material, and your performance in class suffers a lot because of this. You have a poor memory and you get confused easily. Your pronunciation is terrible, but you keep trying to improve. You have not yet lost hope; you think the teacher will see how hard you try and give you a good grade, even though you answer incorrectly most of the time. You get Cs and Ds on your written work.

Student 2

You study a lot and do very well on written work, but you are extremely shy and don't like to participate in class. You like to sit in the back and keep your eyes cast down. You always know the answer when called on, but you never volunteer. You are uncomfortable if you are asked to work at the board. You do not like to work in groups with other students because you are embarrassed around people you don't know well. You give the impression of being disinterested in the class, although you actually like it. You have never spoken to the teacher about your attitude in class. You hope that your written work will be good enough to get you an A in the class.

Student 3

You are a football player who has trouble staying awake in class because you spend all your time practicing for the game. You have a tutor, but you don't spend much time with him. You have never studied languages before, and you have some trouble reading and writing in English. You don't like Spanish, but your advisor told you that you have to take the course and that you must make an effort to pass it. You answer when called on, but you feel you are making a fool of yourself so you rarely (if ever) volunteer. When you don't understand things, you give up and fall asleep. You think that your teacher is not very sympathetic to your problems.

Student 4

You are a very intelligent student who has studied two years of Spanish in a good high school. You have a solid grasp of all the grammar rules and a fairly extensive vocabulary. You are enthusiastic about this course and have a pleasant, outgoing personality. You smile a lot. You like to volunteer. You are not embarrassed by your mistakes, so you sometimes try to go beyond your linguistic ability when answering a question. Your answers to mechanical exercises are always correct. You are thinking of becoming a Spanish major.

Student 5

You are a student at this university because it is a good place to meet people and have a good time. You are not interested in any particular subject, but you are taking Spanish because your friends told you that it is an easy class. You spend very little time studying. You think you can probably get a C in the class if you cram for the final. You think your charm will get you a good class participation grade. You have been absent a lot, but you have invented elaborate excuses for why you haven't been in class and your teacher has hesitatingly excused you. You rarely volunteer an answer (since you don't know the answer), but you smile and nod a lot to give the impression that you know what's going on. You always pretend that you understand more than you do. When the teacher calls on you, you often answer wrong, but you hope the teacher won't notice.

Student 6

You are a major in computer science and your only goal in life is to have job in which you make a lot of money. You are taking Spanish because it is a requirement. You have the ability to get Bs and Cs on your written work because you are intelligent and catch on quickly, but you don't spend a lot of time studying. You usually study only when there is a quiz or exam. You are not interested in developing oral skills, since you never expect to use Spanish in real life. You do only what is absolutely necessary to pass the course. You would prefer that the teacher ignore you in class. You aren't hostile, but you aren't cooperative either. You never volunteer. You answer only when called on. Your answers are generally correct, but are as brief as possible. You like group activities since the others do the work and you can just sit there. You can't wait to get the language requirement out of the way and go on with your life.

Student 7

Your mother is a native speaker of Spanish and your father is from the United States. You have grown up hearing Spanish and speaking it with your mother, but you have never formally studied it. You do not know how to read and write Spanish very well, and you have no understanding at all of the grammar. You do very poorly on written work, since you tend to use the informal Spanish you have learned at home, which is not always grammatically correct. When you speak, however, you are fluent. Your pronunciation is excellent, your vocabulary is very good, and you are able to answer without any hesitation. You sometimes make grammar mistakes that are common to native Spanish speakers, but you know that the other students are impressed by your ability to speak, which gives you confidence. You would like to learn how to speak Spanish correctly, and you are thinking of majoring in Spanish, so you try hard and have a good attitude in class. You are hoping that your oral skills will help you get a good grade in the class, even though your written work is poor.

Student 8

You are having a lot of personal problems right now and you have not been able to concentrate on your work since the semester began. You almost never study because of your emotional state, and you have missed a lot of classes (unexcused, because you have not wanted to talk to the teacher about your problems). You don't understand *anything*. You have never had Spanish before and you have no idea of

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the meaning of the words when you hear them. You don't know what a verb is, you don't know the difference between an adjective and a noun, you don't know what the word conjugate means, and you are completely lost in class. You feel that it is hopeless, but you can't drop the class unless you drop out of school altogether. You sit and stare out the window whenever possible, thinking about your problems. You don't know what the teacher is asking you when she calls on you, so you don't even try to answer. You can only say *no sé* (I don't know), since the teacher does not want you to use English. You are depressed all the time and don't show any interest in anything.

Student 9

You have had a year and a half of Spanish in high school (four years ago) and you still remember some of the basic things (you think). However, some new material is being introduced in class that you have not had before and you are starting to feel lost. Class used to be easy for you, so you never studied. Now, you have poor study habits and the class is starting to seem very difficult. At times you are unable to answer when called on in class. You hope that the teacher won't notice that you are on a downhill slide and that your good performance earlier in the quarter will see you through. You do not volunteer and you hope that you won't be called on. You prefer group activities, where you will sometimes go unnoticed.

Student 10

You are the class clown. You love to joke and have a good time. You can be an excellent student, and you generally get good grades on written work, but you also tend to be a little lazy at times. You would like to get by without working too hard. You want the teacher and the other students to think that you are charming and cute. You want everyone to like you. You volunteer a lot, but you aren't always careful about how correctly you answer. You like to work in groups, but you don't always take the assignments seriously, and you see group activities as a chance to play. (You don't want the teacher to be upset with you, however, so you keep it within limits.) You think class participation means being entertaining and being entertained. You tend to get bored by mechanical drills and highly structured activities, even though you need to practice (you make mistakes when you do them because you don't think about what you're doing).

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