

Cambridge University Press
 978-0-521-39781-0 – Five-Minute Activities
 Penny Ur and Andrew Wright
 Excerpt
[More information](#)

a black		cat
an expert	—	doctor
a brilliant		student
a tidy		room
a rainy		day
a difficult		problem

Then they volunteer ideas for different combinations, for example ‘a black doctor’, and you draw a line to join the two words. See how many the class can make. If someone suggests an unusual or strange combination, they have to justify it – can you justify ‘an expert cat’, for example?

Variation: For an advanced class you might try adverb–adjective combinations: ‘desperately miserable’, ‘reasonably fair’, etc.

Amazing facts

Listening.

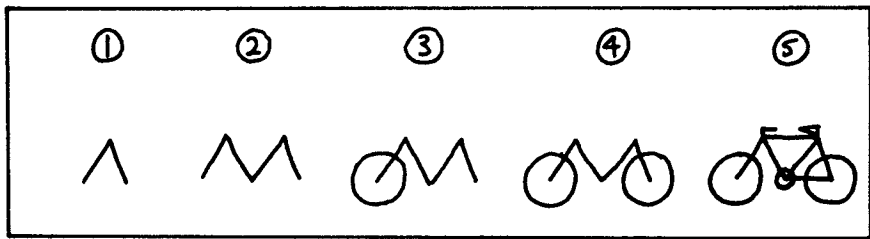
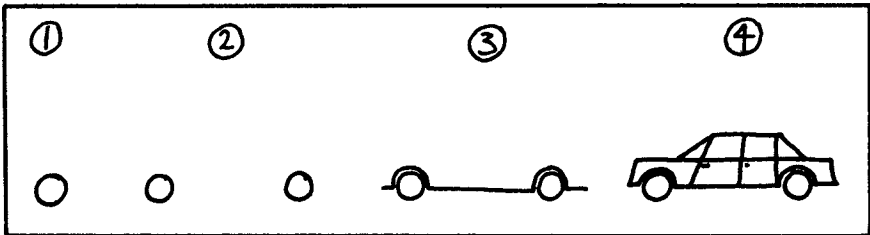
Procedure: You and your students may like the idea of having a regular five-minute slot in your lesson called ‘Amazing facts’. In this session you or a student have five minutes in which to inform the class about something they may not be familiar with and which is likely to amaze them. An obvious source of information is the *Guinness Book of Records*, available in most countries and brought up to date every year. Books of statistical information from government sources or from specialist institutions are another source.

Instead of trying to fill a five-minute slot, a single amazing statement can be made. It might well provoke some discussion. Here is a brief example: ‘People often say that it is always raining in Britain, but the annual rainfall in London is only 61 cm. In Brussels it is 72 cm, in Lisbon it is 68 cm, in Milan it is 94 cm, and in Geneva it is 86 cm.’

Ambiguous picture

Describing and vocabulary practice.

Procedure: Draw a small part of a picture. Ask the students what it is going to be. Encourage different opinions. Do not confirm or reject their ideas. Add a little more to the drawing and ask the question again. Build your picture up in about four stages.



Associations

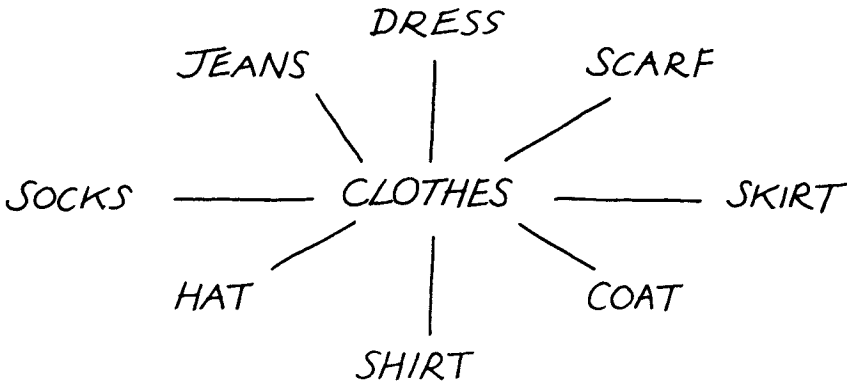
Vocabulary review and enrichment through imaginative association.

Procedure: Start by suggesting an evocative word: ‘storm’, for example. A student says what the word suggests to him or her – it might be ‘dark’. The next student suggests an association with the word ‘dark’, and so on round the class.

Other words you might start with: sea, fire, tired, holiday, morning, English, family, home, angry. Or use an item of vocabulary the class has recently learnt.

Variation: If there is time, after you have completed a chain of about 15–25 associations, take the final word suggested, write it on the board, and, together with the class, try to reconstruct the entire chain back to the original idea.

Or, at a simpler level:



The same activity can, of course, be done as individual or pairwork instead of in the full class.

Note: The same activity can be used as an introduction to literature. Take a central theme or concept of a story or poem you are planning to read with the class, and brainstorm associations in order to open and direct students' thinking towards the ideas that they will encounter in the text.

Variation 1: Instead of inviting free association, limit it in some way. For example, invite only adjectives that can apply to the central noun, so 'decision' might get words like: free, final, acceptable, wrong, right; and 'clothes' ones like: black, old, smart, warm, beautiful. Or invite verbs that can apply to the noun, for example: you can take, make, agree with, cancel or confirm a decision; and you can wear, tear, wash, buy, throw away or keep your clothes.

Variation 2: A central adjective can be associated with nouns, for example, 'warm' could be linked with: day, food, hand, personality. Or a verb can be associated with adverbs, for example, 'speak' can lead to: angrily, softly, clearly, convincingly, sadly.

Variation 3: For more advanced classes a word root can be used as the starting point, such as 'part' (leading to words like: partition, depart, partake, participate, impart). Alternatively, use prefixes (be-, de-, e/ex-, in/im-, inter-, per-, pro-, sub-, syn/sym-, trans-, etc.), or suffixes (-ant/ent, -able/ible, -ful, -ous, -ment, -ness, -tion, etc.).

Variation 4: As a follow-up, erase everything on the board, except for the central word. Challenge your class to recall and write down as many of the brainstormed words as they can.

Categories

Listening comprehension of isolated words.

Procedure: Ask the students to draw two or three columns on paper, and give them a category heading for each. For example, food and drink, or animal, vegetable, mineral. Then dictate a series of words which can fit into one of the categories. They have to write a cross or tick in the appropriate column for each word you dictate. For example, the headings 'Food' and 'Drink', and the items 'tea, apple, bread, coffee, cake, water, egg, meat' might result in:

FOOD	DRINK
x	x
x	x
x	x
x	
x	

For ready-to-use examples, see the BOX.

Note that you will need to note down the crosses yourself as you dictate the words in order to check the results.

Variation: For a more difficult and time-consuming exercise, students actually write out each word in its appropriate column. This will result in something like:

FOOD	DRINK
apple	tea
bread	coffee
cake	water
egg	
meat	



BOX: Categories

Elementary

Food, drink: tea, apple, bread, coffee, cake, water, egg, meat, beer, milk, chocolate, potato, rice, pasta, orange juice.

Animals, objects: dog, pencil, chair, elephant, door, man, lion, book, table, cat, horse, donkey, television.

Big, small: elephant, mouse, matchbox, house, flower, mountain, pencil, cigarette, egg, sea.

Round, square: sun, book, blackboard, ball, window, door, moon, television, flower, house, ring, wheel, desk.

Land, sea, air: cloud, earth, rain, fish, tree, wave, fog, sky, field, ship, road, mountain, wind, swimmer.

More advanced

Sad, happy: smile, tears, laugh, miserable, tragedy, cheerful, pleasure, depressing, fortunate, celebration, weep, amusing, mourn, joke, delight.

Loud, soft: shout, scream, whisper, crash, murmur, rustle, roar, hum, bang, sigh, squeak, cheer, thunder, tick.

Good, bad: ethical, evil, wicked, virtuous, immoral, naughty, villainous, faulty, saintly, perfect, excellent, deplorable.

Superior, inferior: servant, queen, master, chief, subordinate, commander, assistant, slave, captain, prince, follower, head.

Sick, healthy: well, fever, fit, energetic, disease, pain, flourishing, sickness, invalid, blooming, collapse, coma, fine.

Chain story

Narration: use of the past tense.

Procedure: Begin telling a story. This can be the first few lines of a story from your coursebook, or improvised, or you can invite a student to start. Then, going round the class, each student has to add another brief ‘instalment’ to the story.

Variation: Before you start, ask each student to choose a word. It can be an item of vocabulary recently learnt, a verb in the past tense, or freely chosen. Then each ‘instalment’ has to include the word the student has chosen.

Changing sentences

Practice of sentence patterns.

Procedure: Choose a simple sentence pattern, which can be based on a grammatical structure you have recently learnt. For example, if you have been studying indirect objects, take a sentence like:

She wrote a letter to her sister.

Then students invent variations, either by changing one element at a time:

She wrote a letter to her husband.

Or by changing as much as they like, provided they maintain the original pattern:

The pilot sent a signal to the airport.

See how many variations they can make in two or three minutes.

Variations: Some coursebooks have pattern tables to guide students in the composition of correct sentences. These look something like this:

We	often		the floor.
People	never	eat	meat.
Children	sometimes	sit on	chairs.
Dogs	always	play with	dolls.
	usually		chocolate.
			balloons.

In the coursebook, students are usually expected to make sensible sentences like:

Children sometimes play with dolls.

For a quick, entertaining variation, tell the students to make ridiculous combinations:

Dogs often sit on chocolate.

Or, more seriously, to substitute elements of their own to make true sentences:

I never eat meat.

Compare yourselves

Getting to know each other; use of comparatives.

Procedure: In pairs, students find different ways of comparing themselves with each other, and write down or simply say the appropriate sentences.

You are taller than I am.
Tina has longer hair than I have.
Jaime is older than Luiz.

Variation: To encourage more interaction, tell the students they may not use aspects (such as height or hair colour) that are immediately apparent, but only things they have to find out through talking:

Peter has more brothers than I have.
Marie knows more languages than Diane.

As a follow-up, share some of the things participants have found out with the rest of the class.

Comparing things

Practice of comparatives, *both*; opposites.

Procedure: Present the class with two different (preferably concrete) nouns, such as: an elephant and a pencil; the Prime Minister and a flower; a car and a person (preferably using vocabulary the class has recently learnt). Students suggest ways of comparing them. Usually it is best to define in what way you want them to compare, for example, by using comparatives:

A pencil is thinner than an elephant.

Or by finding differences:

The Prime Minister is noisy and a flower is silent.

Or similarities:

Both a car and a person need fuel to keep them going.

Variations: You can give a whole set of related nouns together, for example, names of different foods, animals, household objects, or well-known people. Then each student can choose which two of them they wish to compare in each response.

If you have a little more time, start by eliciting a set of such items from the students, and writing them up at random on the board. As each student suggests a comparison, link the two items with a line. Then you can go back later and see if participants can remember what sentence is represented by each line.

Controversial statements

Discussion of controversial topics.

Procedure: Write up two or three controversial statements, or proverbs, on the board (there are some examples in the BOX). Each student writes down ‘agree’ or ‘disagree’ or ‘don’t know’ for each item. Invite them to compare their answers in pairs or threes.

Then find out what the majority opinion on each is, by vote. If you have time, discuss them.

BOX: Controversial statements

1. Beauty is only a matter of taste.
2. Riches are for spending.
3. Punishment never does any good.
4. A foreign language can only be learned, not taught.
5. A woman’s place is in the home.
6. Boys and girls should have the same education.
7. A country gets the government it deserves.
8. Teaching is basically a matter of explaining things properly.
9. Married people are happier than unmarried people.
10. Love means never saying you’re sorry.
11. People work better if they are paid more.
12. Everyone is basically selfish.

Correcting mistakes

Identifying and correcting mistakes in English, to encourage monitoring by students of their own mistakes.

Procedure: Write up a few sentences on the board that have deliberate mistakes in them. If you wish, tell the students in advance how many mistakes there are in each sentence. With their help, correct them. There are some examples of possible sentences in the BOX, in order of difficulty, together with the corrected versions. Or, better, use (anonymous!) examples taken from their own written work.

Note: It is important to stress the fact that the sentences initially presented are unacceptable, and to make corrections on the board so that the students are left with the image of the correct sentences at the end of the activity. 