

## **A: Engaging communication**

Activities in this section are designed to provoke enthusiastic engagement in the process of communication whilst, at the same time, ensuring some focus on the language being used. They are intended to make learners as comfortable as possible with the creative use of English.

- 
- 1 Everybody up**
  - 2 Personal interviews**
  - 3 Space station speed dating**
  - 4 Experts**
  - 5 What's my line?**
  - 6 Portrait interviews**
  - 7 Musical stories**
  - 8 Fishbowl improvisation**
  - 9 Wordless conversation**
  - 10 Drawing happy dreams**
  - 11 Mystery objects**
  - 12 Discussion cards**
  - 13 House rules**
-

## 1 Everybody up

**Learners stand up and, where possible, move to the centre of the room. They are organised in small groups of about five. They discuss topics suggested by the teacher or by themselves so they can report on their conversations later.**

*Everybody up* is a term I have borrowed from Jane Revell (2015 and elsewhere). It is, of course, similar to other ‘walkaround’ activities such as *Find someone who* and other ‘mingle’ suggestions.

- 1 Ask all the learners to stand up and move the furniture so that there is a space in the middle of the room.
- 2 Separate learners into small groups – from three to seven people. Tell them that they should complete the following task:

*Find out who in the group plays or played a musical instrument. Find out why they started and if they still play. If so, find out how often and where they play, how often they practise and how they learnt. If no one in the group plays a musical instrument, find out what instrument they would like to play and why.*

(Harmer and Revell, 2015)

Tell learners that you will be asking for a report from some of the group members when the task is over. While they are doing the activity, move around monitoring them, making sure that they are on task. Be available to help with words and phrases they need, if necessary.

- 3 If possible, make a space so that the next stage of the activity takes place whilst everyone is standing up – it makes listening more ‘immediate’ and active. Ask a representative to tell the rest of the class about the musicians – or would-be musicians – in the group. When this is done, invite everyone in the class to ask the people they have heard about any more questions.

- 4 Get members of each group to tell you what they learnt. Use what has been said as an opportunity to focus on some of the language you heard, pointing out where things could have been said differently or better.

### Why it works for me

Because learners move into a different 'space' and work in small groups rather than, say, pairs, the activity modifies the usual pattern of the lesson and provokes a very life-like communication atmosphere and experience. This activity is genuinely communicative in a content, language and very human way.

### Alternatives

I chose the topic of music – playing a musical instrument – because almost anyone can relate to it, musician or not. Nearly all non-instrumentalists wish they could play music in some form, and most are more than happy to talk about it. But, of course, there are many other topics like this – ones with universal human appeal. We could substitute sport, signature dishes that people cook, hobbies we have, places we regularly visit, people's attitudes to the names they were given, etc. The main thing to have in mind is that we want learners to talk about areas of universal interest.

### Online/virtual variations

Using a 'hands up' protocol (previously agreed with the class) where people indicate when they want to speak/ask a question, learners can interview each other. But that doesn't match the advantages of the face-to-face version. Better, maybe, to put learners in breakout rooms in groups and have them report back after a set time.

---

Harmer, J. and Revell, J. (2015). *Jetstream Intermediate Student's Book*. Helbling Languages.

## 2 Personal interviews

**Students interview each other based on questions that are suggested by an initial learner contribution.**

Personal interviews are especially appropriate at the beginning of a new semester with new learners. At the A1 level they can be as simple as having learners ask, 'What is your name?' 'Do you have a pet? What is its name?' 'What is your favourite food?' However, the version I am going to use is more like a B2 level activity and closely follows one described by Rachael Roberts (see the reference below) as, 'one of my favourite speaking activities because it is flexible and can be used at any level'. The beauty of it is that after a short stimulus from the teacher, it is the learners who make all the language and meanings.

- 1 Think of a few questions (say ten) about yourself which you would be happy to answer in public.

*Where do you live?*

*Who – if anyone – lives with you?*

*Do you have any pets and if so, what are they?*

*What's your favourite thing in the house/apartment?*

Or for a higher level:

*What is the scariest thing you have ever done?*

*Who would you most like to meet and what would you say to them?*

*What music would you like to hear/did you hear at your wedding?*

Then write the answers to your questions on the board (without telling the learners what the questions were).

- 2 Learners now work in groups to try and work out what the questions might be for the answers on the board (see also 12). While they are doing this, go round the room helping them with language problems, etc. But again, do not confirm what the questions were.
- 3 Now learners get into pairs and use the questions they have come up with in stage 2 to interview each other. They do this in turns.

- 4 Learners can now either tell the class about their partner or they can write a short paragraph about them which might go up on the classroom wall.

### Why it works for me

What do some people like talking about best? Themselves! And as a genuine piece of communication – especially at the beginning of a course – this has to be included here. Couple that with attention to language and its predictable interactions and this classic activity has its place in any effective teacher's repertoire.

### Alternatives

Klippel (1984) has an activity called *Identity cards* where learners have to fill in a form about their partner and then tell the class about them. She suggests the task can be varied by not using cards and saying instead, 'Find out three things about your partner that are important or interesting,' or 'Find out five things about your partner that one could not find out just by looking.'

We can add a playful element by having learners pretend to be someone else (a celebrity, a historical figure, etc.) and the interviewer has to find out who they are.

There is a much more extensive job-based interview sequence in 49.

### Online/virtual variations

This activity works perfectly well in an online context with a little bit of adaptation. We can share the screen to show learners the answers to our own questions (see stage 1 above) or we could put the answers in the chat box. We can then discuss with all the learners on the screen what the questions might be. If we can – and if it is not too organisationally complicated – we then put the learners in pairs. If that doesn't seem plausible then we can have the class interview one learner after another. We will have to manage the conversations well – who speaks next, etc.

---

Klippel, F. (1984). *Keep Talking*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Roberts, R. <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/rachael-roberts/rachael-roberts-a-favourite-speaking-activity>. Accessed 02/02/2021

### 3 Space station speed dating

**Learners have to choose who they want to accompany them for their year in a space station hovering above the earth.**

In the USA in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was a custom where women, looking for a husband, would invite eligible young bachelors on 1<sup>st</sup> January for fifteen-minute-maximum visits. Was that the origin of speed dating in which couples try and see if there might be any attraction and compatibility between them in structured three-minute interviews?

ELT classrooms should not be dating environments (!), though Laura Hayward uses an enjoyable activity of this kind on the video to accompany Harmer (2007), but the short, structured interview is a naturally effective communicative activity at almost any level and age.

- 1 Tell learners that they are going to spend a year in a space station 400 kilometres above the earth. They will take one person with them. They have to choose who that is.
- 2 Discuss ideal qualities for a companion in such circumstances. What kind of character should they have? What would make them easy to live with and reliable in the event of trouble? What should they be good at? The language of the questions will obviously depend on the level of the group. Prompt learners with suggestions to try and broaden the discussion.
- 3 Now ask learners to write a maximum of four questions (that's all there will be time for) to help them work out who their ideal space station companion is. This is not a romantic speed dating activity – it's more practical than that! They do this individually. While they are working on their questions, go round the class helping learners with language suggestions.
- 4 Tell learners they are about to start the procedure and that they will have a maximum of two minutes to interview each 'candidate'.

- 5 Learners now form 'fluency circles' (Bohike, 2013) where half the class stand in an inner circle facing outwards and the other half form an outer circle facing inwards. The outer circle learners must interview the inner circle learners opposite them. They should have notebooks with them to record their thoughts.
- 6 The interviews start. After two minutes (or three, if you think that is necessary) ask the outer circle learners to move one person to the left. Now they interview the new learners in front of them.
- 7 When the circle has been completed, it is now the inner circle's task to interview the people opposite *them*. As before, they have two (or three) minutes for each interview.
- 8 When the activity is over, have a discussion with the class. Who would they choose and why? Which of their questions were the most effective? How useful have they found the activity, etc? This is the moment where you can clear up any language issues that may have arisen.

### Why it works for me

Learners work together, building inter-group cohesion. They have to make a choice and this demands deep processing. There is purposeful repetition, obviously. The activity is dynamic and fast-moving.

### Alternatives

Some teachers do actually role play a speed dating session (with no need for a space station!), but it has to be done in an appropriately light-hearted way (see also 2 and 48).

### Online/virtual variations

It would be difficult to create fluency circles online. However, we can create an interview panel for a space station team. Groups (the whole group, or groups in breakout rooms) can design their questions and then interview members of the other groups one by one (with everyone looking on). With smaller classes we wouldn't need to form breakout groups, of course.

---

Bohike, D. (2013). 'Fluency-oriented second language teaching' in Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M. and Snow, M. A. (Eds). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language: Fourth Edition*. Heinle Cengage Learning.

Harmer, J. (2015). *The Practice of English Language Teaching: Fifth edition*. Harlow, Essex: Pearson Education Limited.

## 4 Experts

**Learners pretend to be experts in a subject. They have to answer questions put to them, but only one word at a time.**

Many years ago, I saw this activity being demonstrated by Ken Wilson at a teachers' conference and was instantly impressed by it. All of the class are involved in this activity either as the 'experts' or as the 'journalists'. The role of the teacher is to create the setting and then to keep the pace moving along, because that's part of the fun.

- 1 Tell the class that they are extremely lucky to have world experts with them – in this case people with world expertise on bears (the animals). They can ask the experts anything they want and they will know the answer. Learners understand that they are about to play some kind of a game.
- 2 Ask the learners to think of questions they would like to ask world experts about bears: 'How dangerous are they?' 'What makes them angry?' 'What do you do if you meet a bear?' etc. They can discuss this in pairs.
- 3 Ask half the class to stand at the front of the class in a line facing their classmates. They are the bear experts! Say that when they are asked a question, they have to answer one word at a time along the line. When they get to the end of the line they double back. They have to keep each sentence going for as long as they can!
- 4 If this is the first time you have used this activity, do a demonstration round. You can ask the experts your own question – anything will do! – such as, 'How tall are bears?' Start at the beginning of the line and get learners to say a word – probably 'bears'. Now indicate the second person in the line who might say 'are'; then the third learner could say 'sometimes'; the next learner might say 'very'; then the next learner 'tall'; the next learner might say 'but'; the next learner might say 'some' etc. so that the sentence goes something like this: 'Bears are sometimes very tall but some bears are shorter



than that and some are fat but some are thin ...' It may not be very enlightening, but it is good fun, and best of all it makes learners think of what words are both grammatically and semantically possible.

- 5 Now ask one of the journalists to ask a question and once again get the experts to answer one word at a time. As before, your role is to push the sentence along giving encouragement where learners are having trouble thinking of a word – offer them suggestions when they get stuck.
- 6 After two or three rounds, swap the journalists and the experts around and now the new journalists ask the new experts *their* questions.

### Why this works for me

By making speaking aloud into a game – where participants are not judged for their attempts at fluency – reluctant speakers will feel more comfortable, we hope. This is vital if we want to encourage them to attempt fluent conversation later. They have to process deeply to make the right grammatical/lexical choices in a hurry.

### Alternatives

Any activity/game in which learners have to speak one word at a time in sequence will work well. For example, learners might have to construct a letter one word at a time (in pairs or groups) or make a speech.

### Online/virtual variations

Given the latency issues of most online connections, this activity will have to be slower with deft use of the mute button and learners numbered in advance! They can be trained for that. The game also works well as a written game where learners can key their words into the chat box.

## 5 What's my line?

**In groups, learners prepare to talk about (and mime) what people in various different jobs do in their working lives. They are interviewed by other groups who have to guess what the occupation is.**

*What's my line?* was a TV show which ran in the USA from 1950–1967 (and in the UK until 1996). This adaptation works well in language classrooms.

- 1 Tell learners to imagine that they have a particular job – anything from being an astronaut or a costume-designer, to an ice-skater, a nurse or a train driver. Later, others will interview them to try and guess what their occupation is.
- 2 Put learners in groups of equal numbers to choose an occupation – as many groups as is feasible, depending on the size of the class. They must then discuss what people in that occupation do: exactly what processes they use, what they do when they start their working day and what routines are typical. The group lists all these things.
- 3 Learners in the group now try and describe these things without being absolutely clear about what they mean! For example, if they wear a nurse's uniform they can say 'special clothes' instead. If they use a stethoscope the learners can say, 'I always carry a special piece of equipment with me,' etc. They also dream up some mime activities (see also 40 and the rest of Section E) they could do to represent the occupation.
- 4 When the groups have finished their preparation, a learner from each group goes to another group. They do their mimes to the group they have gone to. The group they are miming to discuss for a maximum of 45 seconds what they think the occupation is before making a decision and writing it down. The visiting learner does not say if they are correct.
- 5 Groups now interview the visiting learner for a maximum of two minutes. They cannot ask, 'What is your occupation?' or 'Do you