

Speaking activities

Activities 31 to 39

The Secret Code game

Ana Maria Mari, Argentina

This is an ice-breaker / warmer for the first time a class meets. It is suitable for all ages and levels. It should take 15 - 25 minutes.

Preparation

You will need lollipops, sweets with wrappers or slips of paper. Prior to the lesson write a secret message (the code is described below) on the wrappers or lollipops or another type of sweet. You may also write out the secret messages on slips of paper that are folded into various shapes.

Procedure

- Greet and welcome students to their first lesson.
- Tell them you'll play game called "Hidden message". You can also tell them, if they are young learners, that you will be playing a game called "Spies".
- Then, if the class is lower level, elicit the alphabet and write it on the board.
- Give out the sweets or lollipops wrapped with the slips of paper. This paper will have a hidden message which will have to be worked out by students if they want to eat their sweets or lollipops. Tell students that each letter used represents the previous letter in the alphabet (Note: Z comes before A). You can demonstrate by writing IJ on the board and you should have spelled out " HI".
- Once students understand, allow them two minutes to work out their messages individually. The first one to find out the hidden message, should read it out to the rest of the class and carry out the instructions on it. See example below:

TBZ ZPVS OBNF UBML BCPVU ZPVS IPMJEBZT
(Decoded: "Say your name. Talk about your holidays")

- Continue around the class until everyone has deciphered their messages. Give help as needed.

Why it works

This game helps students learn each other's names and builds a sense of community at the beginning of the school year. It also helps students develop their fluency and truly "breaks the ice "if students have just come back from a break or are just starting their studies.

This creative classroom aid is usable in multi-level, large classes with limited resources as well as adaptable for elementary classrooms too.

Variations

Higher level students can be given hidden messages which review functions such as complaints, apologies, etc. Teachers may include any topics they want students to talk about such as hobbies, family, animals and so on.

Follow-up

Once they have finished getting to know each other, they may write a short paragraph about what they learnt about their pals as a homework task..

(This activity was previously published by ETA magazine (The English Teacher Assistant - US) May 2000, Herald Educational Newspaper - July 2004 (Argentina). It appeared at English Club Net web site (2000), Parlo web site and China Education Exchange site.)

The cooking test

Richard Frost, British Council, Turkey

This is a writing and speaking activity that is a lot of fun for students. It helps them to practise food and cooking related vocabulary as well as how to give instructions.

Preparation

Your students will need to know vocabulary associated with food and cooking. It is a good idea to teach them words for cooking utensils too (e.g. saucepan, knife) and verbs connected with cooking (e.g. fry, chop). You might also like to teach some language you find in recipes (e.g. imperatives, sequencers, quantifiers).

You also need to photocopy and cut up or make your own ingredients cards.(annexe cook et annexe cook-strange.pdf)

Procedure

- Tell the students that you are going to have a cooking competition to decide who the best chefs in the class are.
- Put the students into pairs and give them a random selection of ingredients cards. Seven or eight in total is usually enough.
- Ask the students to talk together and invent a new dish using all of the ingredients on their cards. When they have thought of one, give them a blank piece of paper and ask them to draw a picture of the meal and write the recipe below.
- Ask the students to decide who is going to explain the recipe and who is going to listen to other people's recipes. Put the students into new pairs with a different partner and ask the speakers to present their recipes to the new partner.
- Re- pair / group the students a number of times so that they have the chance to hear and tell about a number of recipes.
- The students who have listened to all the recipes have to report back to their partner on what they have heard.

Variations

- Instead student to student work the pairs could come to the front of the class and present their recipes.
- Instead of using only food as ingredients, you can also use strange ingredients such as 'a sock' or 'grass'. Young learners in particular love inventing horrible new meals.

Follow up

- You could put the recipes up around the room and get students to vote for the best one.
- Use the recipes to create a class cook book.

Picture dictation

Fiona Lawtie, Teacher, Freelance materials writer

This is a low preparation fun activity that works well with large classes, especially with young learners and teens. All your students need is a blank piece of paper and all the teacher needs is a little bit of imagination.

Procedure

- First of all explain to the students that they are going to do a picture dictation, that you are going to describe a picture to them and that all they have to do is simply listen and draw what they hear you describe.
- You then describe a simple and easy to draw picture to them and they draw it. To help you with your first picture dictation you can use the picture on the accompanying worksheet and the description below it as a guide. It is a very simple picture for a low-level beginner's class but this kind of activity can be adapted to any level of student. Simply change the content of the picture accordingly. (annexe picdic.pdf)

When you are describing the picture it is best to describe one object at a time slowly and to repeat each description two or three times.

- Make sure you give students enough time to finish drawing one object before you move onto the next object and it is a good idea to walk around and look at the student's drawings as they are drawing them so that you can see how well they are understanding your descriptions and then you can adjust them accordingly and give them any support they need.

Tips for making the activity work well

- Before starting the activity you may want to draw a square or rectangle to represent a piece of paper on the board and elicit vocabulary from the students that they will need to know for the activity, such as in the middle of the piece of paper, in the top/bottom/right/left hand corner of the piece of paper, in front of, behind, on top of etc.
- For lower-levels, you may even want to draw pictures of the things, the house, the hill, clouds, birds and children skipping etc. that will appear in the picture on the board before starting the activity to review vocabulary. How much pre-teaching of vocabulary and language you do will depend on the level of your students.

Variations

- Get students to colour the pictures in afterwards like a colour dictation, for example, colour the roof of the house green, colour the door of the house red, or get students to label different objects by writing the name of the object underneath it, such as house, bird etc.
- You can also get students to write a description of the picture afterwards.
- Another good variation is to give students a list of objects and get them to draw their own pictures with all those object in them.
 - The students then work in pairs. One student describes their picture to their partner and their partner draws what they hear.
 - They then swap roles and afterwards they compare the pictures they drew with their original drawings pointing out the differences and usually having a giggle.

The holiday maze

Emma Pathare

This is a reading and speaking activity. Students make decisions in pairs or groups with the aim of going on a successful holiday. It is based on a 'maze' principle, which gives students different options and a variety of different holiday outcomes. There isn't one 'correct' answer - different groups find themselves going on different holidays - so you can use the activity several times with the same class.

It is an excellent, fun way to practice the 'functional' language of agreement and disagreement, suggestion and negotiation, as well as specific language relating to holidays, in a genuinely 'communicative' activity.

It can be used with any level from pre-intermediate to upper-intermediate and beyond. (annexe maze.pdf)

Procedure

- Set the context for your students . The students are going on holiday together and want to have the best time possible. You can set the context by describing the situation, telling an anecdote, showing a picture or posing some discussion questions. I find that students love to talk about their experiences - ask them

about times they have been on holidays with friends. Get them to talk about problems they had and things they enjoyed.

- When the context has been established, put the students in groups of 2 to 5 students. The activity can be run as a whole class activity with you using one set of cards. The students ask you for the card they have chosen after each discussion. You can also run the activity as independent group work, with a set of cards for each group. The important thing is to encourage as much discussion as possible.
- Students listen to or read what is written on the first card. They must then discuss the different options and come to an agreement about what to do. They then read the next card until they reach a conclusion and find out if they had a successful holiday or not. It is absolutely vital that the students really discuss each option and its possible implications; if they don't, they will finish very quickly and will not have had the speaking practice that the activity is intended to provide.
- Your role: walk around and listen to the groups. If groups are not really discussing much, ask questions about their reasons for their decisions and prompt them to discuss more. Before you start the activity, think carefully about how to group the students. How can you best encourage speaking?

Especially at lower levels, it can be a good idea to pre-teach vocabulary which you know the students will need for the activity. Read through the cards and make a list of words or phrases that you think your students may not know, especially 'topic' vocabulary (i.e. holidays). Before the activity starts, pre-teach these words.

It can really help the flow of conversation if students are confident in using functional language. In this activity, students will be discussing, negotiating and making decisions. They may also be arguing, disagreeing and changing their minds. These expressions may be useful

- "I think we should . . ."
- "That's a good idea but . . ."
- "What about . . ."
- "Let's . . ."
- "I don't agree with . . ."
- "I've changed my mind."

Shop service role-play

Emma Pathare

A role-play in which your students practice making complaints and dealing with people in a shop.

Description

This is a lively role-play in which one student is a customer returning goods to a shop and the other student is a shop assistant. Each student has a role card with the information they need to give or find out from their partner, and the answers that they

will give their partner. There are two versions of the customer role card so that the role-play can be repeated using different information.

The customer has two items to return (one broken and the other the wrong size or colour). The receipt on their role card provides the information they will need to give to the shop assistant. The customer wants his or her money back . . . but the shop assistant knows their manager doesn't like returning money! The students need to resolve the situation.

Procedure

- Set the context for the role-play. You can do this in many ways; for example, by describing the situation, by telling an anecdote, by showing a picture or by posing some discussion questions.
- Once you have established the context, you could ask your students talk about the times they have taken things back to a shop, the reasons why they did and what happened.

Variation

In small groups or as a whole class, I ask the students to brainstorm the language that we would use in these situations, for example:

"Can I help you?"

"I would like to return this . . ."

"There is a problem with this . . ."

"It is a very nice shirt/T-shirt but the colour/size is not quite right."

"I'm very sorry but . . ."

"I'm afraid that . . ."

Don't forget to get your students thinking about 'register' - the degree of politeness they use in the role-play; for example, which of the following do you think would get a better response?

"This shirt is the wrong colour. Give me money back."

"I would like to return this shirt because . . ."

I extend this section by getting students to work on pronunciation, focusing on sentence stress and intonation.

- Put the students in pairs. Explain the role cards. Do a quick demonstration with one or two stronger students. Give out the cards.
- Set a time limit. As the students do the role-play, walk around and listen. If I want to do some specific language work, I note down some of the problems they have with language and use these for a correction slot afterwards.
- When most of the students have finished end the activity. Give the customers a copy of the 'Customer Satisfaction Survey' and ask them to complete it individually. When they have finished, they can work in small groups to compare their experiences. Ask the 'shop assistants' to get into small groups to discuss a good policy for returned goods. One person in each group can complete the policy form.
- If there is time, ask your students to swap roles (and partners, for more variety). The 'shop assistant' role card from the first role-play can be used again. Give the new customers the 'customer role card, version 2'. When the role-play is finished, group the students as you did after the first role-play. To

finish, you could ask each group of shop assistants to describe their returned goods policy to the whole class. Invite the other students, as customers, to comment. (annexe shop roles.pdf)

- Role-play cards:
 - Shop assistant
 - Customer, version 1 and 2
- Customer satisfaction survey
- Returned goods policy form (optional - the shop assistants could use their own paper)

Story telling grid

Fiona Lawtie, Teacher, Freelance materials writer

This is a low preparation but high output activity which I have used successfully with teens and adults. The aim of the activity is to get students to orally create a short story in small groups or pairs.

- First of all draw a grid on the board and then put one word in each box. You can make your story grid any size you want but the bigger the grid is the more complicated the activity will become.
 - You can recycle vocabulary that students are currently working on in class in the story grid, but to ensure that students can create a good story you should include a mixture of words, such as people and place names, verbs, nouns, adjectives etc., and it is usually good to throw in words that might give the story a bit more spice, such as crime, love, hate murder, theft, robbery, broken hearted, treasure, accident, etc.
- Explain to the students that the aim of the activity is to create a story using all the words in the story grid. Students can use any vocabulary or grammar they want to but they have to include all the words in the story grid.
- The first time you do this activity you can use the example story grid and model the story telling part of the activity for the students and then give the students another example story grid from the worksheet to use, or you can easily create your own story grid. (annexe story grid.pdf)
Another variation is to get students to create story grids for each other to use. Next get the students to create their own stories in pairs or small groups and once the students have created their stories, they can retell their story to you, the rest of the class or to other groups.
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Follow up activities and variations

- At the end of the activity the class could vote on the best stories in different categories, for example the most creative story, the most interesting story, the funniest story, the best told story etc. This activity can also be easily developed into a creative writing activity, either individually as homework or as pair or group writing practice.
- Another interesting spin-off is to get students to rewrite their stories as a radio drama. If you have recording facilities the students can perform and record their radio drama on a cassette to listen to in class. If you do not have recording facilities you can get students to write their story as a short play and

try to find them an audience who they can perform to such as another English teacher or another English class.

Feedback on language use

I find it is best to give students individual or group feedback on their language use in a storytelling activity after the students have finished telling the story for the first time.

- I usually make notes of anything I would like to go over with students while they are telling the story.
- I find interrupting students to correct their language use while they are telling the story dampens their creative mood and restricts their language use.
- If the students are going to record their story or perform it live, I get them to perform it to me again so I can help them with their language before they record it or perform it to an audience outside of the class.

Discussion wheels

Nik Peachey, teacher, trainer, materials writer, British Council

Discussion wheels are a good way of giving students time to think and formulate opinions before they do discussion work. They work particularly well with areas of discussion which can have ranges of agreement or disagreement.

- **Preparation**
 - To create a discussion wheel you simply need 8 or 10 contentious sentences based around a theme which you would like the students to discuss.
 - Draw a circle on a piece of paper and draw lines through the circle (one line for each sentence) so that the circle is divided into segments.
 - At the end of each line, write one of the sentences, then make sure to copy enough so that each student has one. (annexe discuss wheel.pdf)
- **Procedure**
 - Give each student out their own discussion wheel and get them to look at the sentences and put a cross on the line next to the sentence according to how much they agree or disagree with it. A cross near the centre of the circle indicates strong disagreement and one near the edge of the circle can indicate strong agreement. A cross half way along the line can mean they are undecided.
 - Once your students have had time to put crosses on each of the lines they can then start to discuss. This can be done in a number of ways. The easiest in terms of classroom management is for you to give them a partner to discuss with (the person next to them or on the table in front of them).
 - If you have the space though, you can ask the students to connect all the crosses so that they form a shape and then stand up and mingle round the class to find the person in the class who has a similar shape to their own. (This has no real pedagogical value, but can be a nice way

- to get students up and moving and get them to talk to other people in their class.)
- Once they have a partner to talk to, get them to discuss and explain their opinions and see if they can convince their partner to change the position of the crosses.

This approach gives the students more of a supportive framework and a goal for their discussion. If you have time and the students are doing well they can discuss with a number of partners, or you can show them your own discussion wheel with your crosses and see if they can convince you to move your crosses.

This is an idea that I first saw in a book called *'Short stories for Creative Language Classrooms'* by Joanne Collie and Stephen Slater (P 52).

Discussion Bingo

Peter Weston, Norway

I have an activity which I use with my intermediate / advanced students. It's called 'discussion bingo' and I use it to get students using set phrases.

- Construct a 10 x 4 grid and in each square place a phrase often used in discussion (Can you explain? Really!, Where was I?, Is that clear?, Can I ask a question? etc.). You'll have to tailor the phrases to your group but I usually set a limit to how many have to be used.
- The object is to get the students talking and using the phrases.
- They have to listen as well - each time a phrase is used they tick it off. The first to tick them all (a pre-set number) shouts Bingo!
- Modifying the rules so that they can only tick off the phrase if they use it themselves means that all have to speak.

It works at the end of a week, or when they need to be livened up a bit. Of course, you have to change the phrases frequently - but I've also modified it to accept any particular point I'm teaching - great for vocabulary of course, but also grammar.

Mini-talks

Lucy Baylis, English teacher, PACE, Goldsmiths College, UK

This (diagnostic) activity is designed to give students freer speaking practice in the form of mini-talks. The teacher then focuses on accuracy in the next day follow-up activity and feedback sheet. It follows a Test-Teach-Test logic.

Procedure:

1. Day 1: Student A chooses a topic and talks for 3 to 4 minutes - students B, C and D then ask questions about the content, the teacher notes down problematic language

2. Day 2: The teacher inputs all the lexical items and phrases problematic for the students and feeds in any new items that would improve the task.

3. Students re-tell their improved version to a new group and are at the end given an individual feedback sheet which focuses both on problematic as well as good use of language and pronunciation.

This activity is suitable for any type of class and any age - students like it and it is a chance for freer speaking practice that is also developmental.