



Online TEFL Training

No-nonsense, fat-free Online TEFL advice



Speaking Unplugged:
30 Activities for One-to-One
Classes

By reducing the amount of material that is imported into the classroom, the teacher frees the learning space for the kind of interactive, talk-mediated learning opportunities that are so crucial for language development.

Scott Thornbury: Teaching Unplugged

Introduction

Like many teachers - I suspect - I used to turn up to my one-to-one classes with a pile of worksheets under my arm. The worst thing that can happen in a one-to-one class is running out of materials, I thought.

And then one day, a private student told me he didn't enjoy my classes because he felt I was just giving him a series of worksheets to complete. What he really wanted to do was develop his communicative competence - become a more fluent, versatile, adaptable and confident communicator in English. He looked at the worksheets - exercises written for practising the present perfect, adjective and preposition combinations - and said:

“These exercises - I can do them at home and check the answers myself.”

Since that fateful class, I changed my approach and ‘unplugged’ my one-to-one lessons.

What is unplugged teaching?

If you are not aware of the term ‘unplugged teaching’ or the ‘Dogme approach’, you might want to [click here](#).

In essence, the approach is as follows:

- teaching that is conversation-driven
- teaching that is materials-light
- teaching that focuses on emergent language

If you feel unsure about adopting a materials-light approach in your lessons, why not try using some of the activities to supplement the materials you use with your learners. Ask for some feedback from your learner, you may find they prefer the new approach.

What follows is a list of 30 minimal resources activities for your one-to-one classes. You can 'teach' these lessons with other resources and materials (videos, photos, dictaphones, laptops with internet access, magazines etc.) but you don't actually need anything except a few sheets of paper to make notes on.

Giving Feedback

When giving feedback, I like to use a simple template with 2 columns:

What you said

What you should say

I write down the incorrect language in the left-hand column and then find time during the lesson - after the utterance, after the exercise, at a convenient point - to see if the learner can correct their own mistakes. If they can't, I suggest you work with them to recast and reformulate their utterances.

When possible, I try to make some notes on the language my learner used in the class and send them as an email attachment so I can quickly review them at the beginning of the next class.

The final point I'd like to make is that you (the teacher) can really help your learner by participating as an equal partner in many of these activities. For example, if you ask your learner to give a 2-minute presentation, you should be prepared to do the same (great listening practice for them too). When two people are together, they produce a dialogue not separate monologues which means you, the teacher, have to interact, provide feedback, and make sure the conversation flows as smoothly as possible.

By collaborating with your learners in these activities, you provide a language model and a model of how to interact when conversing in English. If you do this well, you may well find that your lessons become more enjoyable: conversations in which learning occurs.

30 Unplugged Activities for One-to-One Classes

- 1. Know the teacher**
- 2. The Question Generator**
- 3. Two-minute talks**
- 4. TED Talks**
- 5. Gimme the short version!**
- 6. It's a deal**
- 7. The Yes/No Game**
- 8. Every Picture Tells a Story**
- 9. Liar, Liar! Excuses, Excuses!**
- 10. If only things had been different...**
- 11. Dear teacher, I need your help**
- 12. The Audition**
- 13. A Story before Bedtime**
- 14. Can I have a few minutes of your time, please?**
- 15. Thinking outside of the Box**
- 16. Playing Devil's Advocate**
- 17. Celebrity Interviews**
- 18. I'm on the phone!**
- 19. The Elevator Pitch**
- 20. The Dinner Party Challenge**
- 21. The Balloon Debate**
- 22. And the Oscar goes to.....**
- 23. Automatic Exclamation**
- 24. Phrasal Verb Swap**
- 25. Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?**
- 26. If I Ruled the World**
- 27. Resolving Disputes**
- 28. To Do List**
- 29. Company Policy**
- 30. You're the Teacher**

1. Know the Teacher

Language Focus: Question forms, short answers

Adult learners can feel 'infantilised' when they speak a foreign language. They may have a confident and respected public identity in their first language but feel like children communicating with adults when speaking their second language, especially with their teacher, who they may respond to as a figure of authority and an imparter of knowledge.

This power relationship is, in my opinion, rather unhealthy and unhelpful in one-to-one classes. As teachers, we are no more intelligent, cultured, open-minded or wise than our learners. We are equals in all respects, except our ability to use the English language.

Therefore, I always recommend a 'getting to know your teacher' activity in the first lesson. As well as giving you a good idea of your student's strengths and weaknesses, we can also use this activity to break the ice.

Start by asking your learner to write down a list of questions they would like to ask you. Give them a few ideas, themes like work, family, hobbies, and let them spend a few minutes thinking and forming questions. Let them write the questions first rather than ask them to think them up on the spot. In real-life situations, we generally prepare questions before asking them (job interviews) and you will get a better idea of what they already know (e.g. their ability to use question words) and any gaps or errors in their knowledge (omission of auxiliary verbs, confusion between what and which).

I recommend you look at their questions before you do the interview and make any adjustments or corrections to ensure the interview flows.

2. The Question Generator

Language Focus: Question forms, Direct and Indirect questions, Short answers

After the first activity, you will know what problems your learner has when forming questions. It is important that you give them lots of opportunities to practise asking questions. Here are a few suggestions:

- A. Provide a list of questions (maybe those created in the previous activity) and ask the learner to create new questions by changing one or more elements in each question. For example, *what's your favourite food?* could be changed to *what's your least favourite food?*
- B. Sentence scramble activity. Change the word order in the question and ask the learner to reassemble them correctly.
- C. Practise direct and indirect questions. Create or reuse a list of questions and ask the learner to identify if the question is direct or indirect and then ask them to reformulate according to whether they are interviewing their President or a friend.

An activity I like to do with my learners is something I call 'The Question Generator'. All you need are a couple of dice and a list of verbs (they could be common verbs, verbs that your learner has recently studied, or verbs that are useful for your learners).

You can do this activity in several ways, depending on which type of questions you want to practise.

a) Assign a number to each question word.

- | | |
|-----------|----------|
| 1. What? | 4. Who? |
| 2. Why? | 5. When? |
| 3. Where? | 6. How? |

The learner rolls the dice to determine which question word they use. Then, you choose a verb from the list. The learner then has to ask you a question using the question word and the verb. Simple as that!

Of course, you can modify this simple activity by choosing auxiliary verbs (be/do/have) or modals (can/should/will) or even indirect question phrases such as:

Would you mind telling me....?

You could also use the dice to determine the verbs (each number could represent a letter and the learner has to form a question using a verb beginning with that letter) or use the dice to decide which tense the question is formed in (1 = Past simple, 2 = Present simple).

The great thing about using dice is you can use them to create hundreds (maybe thousands) of question combinations.

3. Two-minute Talks

Language Focus: Signposting language, discourse markers

Being able to speak for extended periods of time (anything from 2 minutes to an hour) is a skill that is essential in modern life. Students give presentations, professionals in the academic and business world speak at sales fairs and / or conferences, and sales personnel sell their product when making a pitch.

Now, your learner may be an experienced public speaker in their first language. However, that doesn't mean they will find it easy to do so in English. Make sure you provide a model first. Prepare a mini-presentation and give your learner some listening practice. Give them a global task first (simple questions or task to check they have understood the main points) and then repeat the presentation with more complex comprehension questions. It's a good idea to transcribe your presentation (or dictate it to your learner) which you can give to your learner as a template and ask them to identify useful phrases and order the different parts of the presentation (introduction, summary, call of action etc.). Why not record yourself doing it and give the recording to your learner?

You could also do this activity with authentic materials such as a [TED talk](#). However, the advantage of giving a mini-presentation to your learner is that you are deal with any queries they have about the language or the stylistic features. Also, as I mentioned earlier, you are showing your learner that you are an equal participant in the learning environment and not an authoritarian figure.

A variant of this activity is to deliver a really poor presentation and work with your learner on analysing why it was poor and how it could be improved.

After you have demonstrated and analysed how to give a mini-presentation, ask your learner to produce one on a topic of their choosing. Make sure you give them some time to note down a few ideas (again, something most of us do before giving a presentation). You may have a learner who wants to dive in and speak without any thinking time. If your learner is willing to do homework, why not ask them to prepare and rehearse their presentation at home?

It can be quite daunting to give a presentation to one person so be sensitive to your learner's level of discomfort. To reduce their stress levels, you could turn your chair round so they can't see you or let them deliver the presentation to a dictaphone or video camera while you leave the room.

However you do it, remember that feedback is the key to improving performance. Give them some constructive feedback and general tips on how they can improve and remember to praise what they did well. Even native speakers hesitate, stutter and make minor grammatical or pronunciation errors when speaking for extended periods. Speaking naturally rather than mechanically is often a key feature in successful presentations and over-correction is likely to result in a stilted presentation style.

If the learner is willing, suggest they repeat the presentation and see if they can incorporate your suggestions. Because mini-presentations are so short, learners generally don't mind practising them as they can make mistakes and start again without wasting too much time or effort. Positive feedback is essential and make sure the learner leaves the lesson proud of what they have achieved but also prepared to work on improving their weaknesses.

4. TED Talks

Language Focus: Signposting language, Intonation, Sentence stress

At some point, you might ask your learner to prepare a longer presentation - their own TED talk. Business English learners and post-graduate students in particular will probably need to give presentations for work or study purposes.

With mini-presentations, you will probably focus on analysing language at sentence level. With extended presentations, your learner will benefit from learning about other linguistic and paralinguistic features such as using anecdotes or body language.

If you have access to the internet, I recommend watching and analysing TED Talks with your learner. As well as providing a transcript of every speech, you can analyse successful presentation strategies and techniques (pausing for effect, how intonation conveys emotion, sentence stress, discourse markers, use of repetition, asking rhetorical questions, body language). If your learner enjoys watching them, recommend that they find a speaker and a presentation they particularly enjoy and can use as a model for their own presentation style.

Then, ask them to prepare an extended presentation for the next lesson. You could break it down into parts and focus on each section at a time. If they feel more confident, you could let them do the whole presentation.

With extended presentations, it is a good idea to provide some assessment criteria such as clarity, speed of delivery, appropriate intonation, body language). The key to this lesson is your feedback and let them try giving the presentation again if they wish.

5. Gimme the short version

Language Focus: Paraphrasing and summarising language

Being able to summarise and paraphrase are useful skills in life. Ask your learners to find an article (it doesn't need to be in English) or an audio / video presentation such as a TED Talk and prepare a summary. They could also use a presentation they have given or attended at work or at university, or a report they have read or written. Tell them that they should imagine their typical audience member is intelligent but not an expert in the field so complex ideas which have to be simplified or explained using anecdotes, metaphors and everyday analogies.

This is a good exercise to practise spoken discourse markers such as *As I was saying* or *Anyway*. It works well if you let the learner find an article that is relevant to their needs and you can ask them to clarify certain points and ask probing questions to challenge them to demonstrate their understanding of the topic. By interrupting, you are always demonstrating how we interact with speakers providing information to confirm we are following what they are saying.

6. It's a deal!

Negotiation simulations are perfect for individual classes and are suitable for any type of learner, not just Business English students. In a negotiation, there is a clear objective and a desired result; therefore, negotiations are inherently stimulating.

The secret to a successful negotiation simulation is preparation time. By giving the learners time to prepare their strategy and come up with a few ideas, you are creating a more level playing field. If you jump straight into a negotiation simulation, your better command of English will give you an unfair advantage: learners need to process their ideas in their first language and then translate them into English whereas your ideas can be automatically processed verbally.

Now, there are lots of negotiation scenarios for Business English students but not so many for General English learners. But, think about how often we negotiate in our daily lives and you'll come up with lots of ideas such as:

- Parents and children: homework, dinner, bedtime, pocket money, household chores, staying at a friend's house, birthday presents.
- Boyfriends and girlfriends: where to go out tonight, which film to see, spending time with other people, which family to visit for Christmas, relationship rules
- Husbands and wives: marriage contracts, division of household chores, agreeing on monthly budgets, looking after children, dealing with relatives, separating and divorcing
- Teacher and student: amount of homework, classroom behaviour, content of lessons, classroom rules
- Employer and employee: working hours, salary, job description, work responsibilities, holiday entitlements and benefits, asking for promotion

- Political leaders: international agreements, importing and exporting, military defense
- Landlord and tenant: agreeing on rental fee, rental conditions, issues about furnishing
- Police officer and witness: making deals, offering protection

There are so many negotiation role-plays we could do in class. Your learner will have to improvise and use all of the language at their disposal to achieve a favourable outcome.

A quick warning: I have seen many teachers take role-plays and simulations more seriously than their learners. Remember, it's the taking part that counts, not winning!

7. Yes / No game

Language Focus: Avoiding short answers, Hedging language

You may have played this game when you were younger. It's very simple and great for improving fluency and making sure our learners avoid giving monosyllabic responses. Ask a series of questions and tell your learner they are not allowed to say 'yes' or 'no' and cannot repeat their responses. I've done this with all sorts of levels and it always works well. Again, if you swap roles with your one-to-one learner, they will get extra question formation practice and you can expose them to a wider range of communication strategies (how to avoid answering awkward questions, demonstrating knowledge by providing lots of details, answering a question in order to promote your idea).

As you may have guessed, this is a great activity for aspiring politicians or people who work in marketing and public relations. In life, we often have to give the impression that we have answered a question when in fact we have skilfully avoided doing so.

8. Every picture tells a story

Language Focus: Relative pronouns and clauses, Narrative tenses

Trainee journalists are trained to answer 5 questions:

1. Who?
2. Where?
3. When?
4. What happened?
5. Why is it important?

Use those 5 simple questions as prompts to initiate speaking. Humans are engineered to tell and respond emotionally to stories. What could be simpler than lessons based around a picture and 5 questions?

Bring in a series of pictures with people in them and ask the students to invent answers to the questions above. You will find that even students who don't consider themselves creative will be able to create stories.

Another way to do this activity is to get portrait photos of people. Ask your learners to choose two of them and decide who they are and what their relationship is. Then, tell them they they are in the news for doing something extraordinary or even criminal. To help your students begin, you can add an object and a place. For example, there was this man and this woman, there was a red motorbike and something happened outside a hospital.

Before long, your learner will be thinking up lots of possible plots.

9. Liar, liar! Excuses, excuses!

Language Focus: Negatives, Narrative tenses

Liar, Liar is a variant on the 'Yes/No' game but with an added twist. The person who responds is never allowed to tell the truth - they have to answer as if they were compulsive liars! As well as being an excellent creative thinking activity, learners are stretched and challenged to use all of the language at their disposal.

You could start by asking simple questions and then challenge your learners by trying to catch them out. Then, let them be the interrogator and you have to avoid telling the truth.

A similar activity is one in which the learner is asked to create credible excuses for their actions. You ask the learner to consider when we make excuses in life: at work, at home, in relationships, at school, to the taxman etc.

Together, create a series of situations in which one person has to make an excuse to tell the other. For example, a boyfriend forgetting his girlfriend's birthday or a student forgetting to do their homework. As we often tell stories and provide details to make our excuses seem more believable, this is an excellent activity for getting learners to use past tenses naturally:

I'm telling you the truth Sir. I did my homework but then I heard something in the street outside and I opened the window. And the wind was blowing really hard and all the dogs were barking, and suddenly, a gust of wind entered the room and blew all the papers off my desk and out of the open window. I ran out into the street, and I saw a dog and it was running around chasing the sheets of paper. When I approached the dog, it started eating the papers...including my homework.

10. If only things had been different...

Language Focus: Unreal conditionals (2nd,3rd, mixed)

Like many of these speaking ideas, learners can use their own lives as the basis for their answers. However, some learners will feel uncomfortable with this so always give them the option of adopting a role.

In this activity, ask them to choose a famous person who they know well. Ask your learner to note down things which have happened in this person's life. For example, David Beckham became a professional footballer. Then ask them to tell you what would have happened had this action not occurred.

If David Beckham hadn't become a professional footballer, he wouldn't have become famous.

This is a great activity for higher-level learners because they will get lots of practise in using unreal conditionals in the past (also known as third conditional) and mixed conditionals.

With business students, you can even look at a case study and discuss what mistakes were made, what should have been done, and why things went wrong or right.

11. Dear, I need your help

Language Focus: Giving advice, modals

Humans live in social groups in which we share and exchange information, advice and opinions. 'Agony aunt' activities in which one person asks an 'expert' for advice are simple to set up:

Student A has a problem and asks Student B for advice on how to resolve it.

The reason these activities work so well is that every single person on the planet has a problem. *I'm too fat. I'm too thin. I'm single. I'm married. I'm rich but life was much simpler when I was poor. I'm poor, I want to be rich.*

Again, we can move beyond simple personal issues. In the last 20 years, we have seen a huge increase in the number of consultants: political, economic, legal, educational, creative, linguistic, life coaches, business coaches, sports coaches.

If your learner has a specific area of expertise, imagine you are a client looking for answers and advice for queries you have. This will make the activity far more relevant to their real-life needs.

12. The Audition

Language Focus: Features of pronunciation (intonation, sentence stress, connected speech), Adverbs of manner

What do actors do before filming a script or performing a play? That's right. They rehearse and practise saying their lines in a variety of different ways to be sure they convey the appropriate emotion.

If your learner really want to improve their spoken English (intonation, stress patterns, connected speech, rhythm), give them scripts to work from. Push them to go beyond the sentence and identify what lies beneath. Create dialogues with your learners and act them out. Get out of the chair and move around. Discuss body language and gestures.

Ask them to read a line in different ways. Stress different words, change the intonation, say the line in different ways depending on what the character is feeling. Use adverbs and ask the learner to say 'I love you' in different ways: happily, angrily, softly, humorously etc.

Model how you would say it and ask your student to repeat using the same sentence stress and intonation. Tell them you are their acting coach preparing them for an important audition. Rehearse! Rehearse! Rehearse!

Then, in your next lesson, you can tell them it's their audition and you are the director looking for an actor to star in your next film.

13. A Story before Bedtime

Language Focus: Narrative tenses, Sentence stress, Intonation to convey emotion

How many parents take real pleasure in storytelling? How many of them discover they have a natural gift for storytelling? Kids are an appreciate and honest audience: if they don't like the way you tell a story, they'll fake sleep to avoid listening to you!

The wonderful thing about telling bedtime stories or fairy tales in general is that you have to exaggerate for dramatic effect and learn how to pause effectively to give kids time to process what they have heard and - more importantly - to predict what's going to happen.

If you want people to listen to you, you have to learn how to vary your speech and pause between each chunk of information. Many learners try to speak quicker when maybe they should be aiming to pause better.

14. Can I have a few minutes of your time?

Language Focus: Questions and follow-up questions

What's everybody interested in? Sports? Fashion? Cars? Travel? Politics?

There is only one subject that everybody is interested in - themselves!

We may deny it but I'm sure it's true. Even if they are not willing to analyse their personality with you, they will probably be willing to complete a questionnaire about their diet, their job, their habits, their beliefs.

Questionnaires are everywhere. With high-level learners, you can use authentic texts. With lower-levels, you can just simplify the questions. Many questionnaires offer multiple-choice answers. You don't need to use them if you don't want to.

Again, in the interests of fairness, if you use a questionnaire with your learner, you should be willing to let them question you back.

15. Thinking outside of the box

Language Focus: Hypothetical language such as conditionals and modals

On many business training courses or in job interviews, participants are given a lateral thinking puzzle to solve. These can also be used in one-to-one classes but you, the teacher, should collaborate with the learner. If not, there is no communicative purpose to the task. Unless you are particularly adept lateral thinker, your language skills will not give you an advantage. In fact, asking your learner to explain their ideas to you is a powerful learning challenge. Equally so, when they use English, they will be required to understand and respond to other people's ideas, views and opinions: training for real-life tasks.

Lateral thinking puzzles are easy to find and the language used in them is usually simple. The difficulty lies in solving them.

16. Playing Devil's advocate

Language Focus: Giving opinions, agreeing and disagreeing,

'Playing devil's advocate' means supporting the indefensible, arguing for something we don't actually believe. Doing so stretches us mentally, morally and intellectually. Many learners will, at some point in their lives, be required to consider opposing views, whether in an exam task or when discussing topics with a person who doesn't share their opinion.

Find a list of controversial statements, such as 'All drugs should be legalised'. Ask them to decide if they agree or disagree with these statements. Look at their answers and then tell them they have to disagree with your views.

This is great for practising fixed and semi-fixed phrases, such as 'On the one hand' or informal but frequently used utterances such as 'You must be joking'.

17. Celebrity interviews

Language Focus: Direct and Indirect Questions, Reported speech

As I mentioned earlier, the existence of a second language identity is often an obstacle to fluid and fluent self-expression: learners can feel infantilised, in the position of children and unable to articulate their complex ideas.

Adopting a role is a bit like wearing a mask: you hide the real you. By letting your learners play the role of a celebrity, they feel at liberty to make jokes, express controversial views, play around with accents etc. Whatever they say can be 'blamed' on the role. This means they are at less risk of 'losing face' if they make linguistic mistakes.

Let them choose the celebrities. it doesn't matter if you know them or not. Explaining their back story is another useful task.

Adopt a role yourself and let them play the interviewer. After the interview, ask them to tell you what you said using reporting verbs - good for reviewing how we use verbs like say, tell and mention.

18. Not now honey. I'm on the phone

Language Focus: Formulaic phrases to use on the phone, Numbers and letters.

Speaking on the phone in your second language can be far more challenging than speaking face to face for one main reason: paralinguistic factors, such as facial expressions and physical gestures, which we use to convey emotion, check understanding and reinforce our message, are invisible to the listener. Interestingly, we still use these paralinguistic signals when speaking on the phone, which suggest we use them for our own benefit as much as for the listener.

Telephone simulations are an excellent way to provide useful and authentic practice for your learner and all you have to do to simulate real phone conversations is to turn your chairs around so you sit back-to-back. I'd also recommend using your own phone as a prop.

Phonecall simulations are easy to set up. All you have to do is find out why your learner might need to speak on the phone. If they need English for business, you could pretend to be a client seeking information. If they are thinking of moving to the UK, you could simulate calling a landlord about renting a flat or applying for a job.

Finally, remember even high-level learners can find it difficult to write down phone numbers or names and addresses in real-time. Most students learn numbers, letters and dates early on in their English language learning experience (at Elementary level) but don't recycle this incredibly useful language on a regular basis.

19. The Elevator Pitch

Language Focus: Modifying adverbs, Gradable and ungradable adjectives, Intensifiers

Imagine you work for a large corporation and have a wonderful idea for a product. You speak to your line manager and they dismiss your idea and tell you to get back to working on what you are being paid to do. A few days later, you enter the lift / elevator and find yourself alone with the CEO. This is your opportunity: you may have only 60 seconds to convince them that your idea is worth investing time and money in.

That's the basic idea of an elevator pitch, which is also the basis for the TV show 'The Dragons' Den'. As well as aiding fluency (you cannot hesitate and reformulate in a 60 second presentation), it helps the learner focus on features of pronunciation and gives them the chance to practise using modifiers and intensifiers such as extremely and absolutely.

What I really like about 'Elevator Pitch' activities is that they can be used in all sorts of contexts when you have to use your persuasive skills and are not only suitable for Business English students.

- A boy has 60 seconds to convince the girl of his dreams that she should go on a date with him
- A screenwriter has 60 seconds with a Hollywood producer to convince them that they should make a script of their film
- A man has 60 seconds to convince a woman that she should not get on that flight and should stay and marry him
- A shop assistant has 60 seconds to convince a customer to buy the product from their shop and not from the larger supermarket which sells the same product at a cheaper price

- A travel agent has 60 seconds to convince a tourist that they should take their trip
- A student has 60 seconds to convince a university professor that they should offer them a place on their course
- A person has 60 seconds to convince a police officer that the action they were doing was not criminal and that there is a perfectly logical explanation for their behaviour
- A girlfriend has 60 seconds to convince their boyfriend that they should go to a particular bar / restaurant / see a film
- An applicant has 60 seconds to convince a potential employer that they should offer them a job

20. Dinner Party Challenge

Language Focus: Conditionals (1st,2nd)

Ask your learner to list 10 famous people: they could be politicians, pop stars, writers, sportsmen and women, actors. Tell them that these people have been invited to a dinner party and their challenge is to create a seating arrangement which will ensure that the conversation flows, nobody is bored, and nobody starts arguing. It's a surprisingly difficult but enjoyable task. As the teacher, you should reformulate where possible but keep the discussion flowing. It's important that you play an active role in ensuring that you decide together but try not to dominate, respond to your learner's idea in a positive way but ask for clarification when necessary and, above all, challenge your learner to justify their choices.

21. The Balloon debate

Language Focus: Reaching consensus, Agreeing and disagreeing

The balloon debate is a common activity in language classes and training courses. The classic scenario is that there are several items or people in a hot air balloon. However, the balloon is starting to fall because it cannot support the weight of the items or people in the basket. Therefore, the group has to decide which items or people to throw overboard.

It's basically a selection task but instead of choosing what you want to keep you focus on what you want to get rid of. Again, the classic balloon scenario may not be particularly relevant to your learner but it can be easily adapted by getting to their specific needs and interests.

For example, maybe you could create a scenario in which the two of you are directors of a company which is experiencing a difficult period. Decide which of your employees you need to let go (be careful here: it could be all too realistic for your learner).

Or, you could pretend to be a couple planning your wedding. You create a list of 20 people to invite but are then informed that the restaurant only has space for 15. Which 5 people do you remove from the list?

Another scenario could be two people planning a tour. You have identified 10 places you want to visit but then find out you only have enough time or money to visit 6 of them.

I'm sure you get the idea: balloon debates depend on the premise that we have to make choices in life and cannot have everything we want. We have to make difficult decisions.

22. And the Oscar goes to....

Language Focus: Agreeing and disagreeing, presenting views and opinions

We spend half our life making decisions: where to eat, what to eat, what to watch on TV, which YouTube video to watch, where to go on holiday. When making decisions, many of us draw up a short list and then look at the pros and cons of each option. Finally, we make our decisions based on logical argument and emotional preferences.

Prize-giving activities are the flipside of balloon debates. Whereas balloon debates are about choosing the least deserving candidates, prize-giving committees decide upon the most deserving candidates.

We make positive decisions every day of our lives: which country to visit on holiday, which film to watch, what to eat tonight, who to invite to dinner, which political party to vote for, which car to buy etc. The list is endless. Think about the kinds of decisions your learner has to make in their life and create suitable scenarios based around their real-life needs.

Create a committee of 2 and challenge your learner to justify their choices.

23. Automatic Exclamations

Language Focus: Exclamations

Much of the language we use in everyday interactions is formulaic. We use fixed or semi-fixed phrases automatically.

How are you?

Fine thanks. And you?

Learners often over analyze these phrases. Instead of processing them as a single linguistic chunk, they try to remember them as a grammatical formula. As these phrases generally have between 2 and 7 words, there is no need for our learners to do this. Far better for them to process them as chunks.

We generally use these short phrases in response to what another person has said to us. We can show we are listening, interested, disinterested, surprised etc. These exclamations include:

right	OK,
no problem	cheers,
you're welcome	really!!!
You must be joking.	I can't believe it.
Hmm..typical.	I told you so.
That's so funny.	Go on.
He did what??	No way

Find a list of these phrases and write them on pieces of paper or post-its. Explore their meaning with your learner (if you know their first language, you might even consider

translating them). Then, create a series of mini-dialogues in which the first person says something that results in the second person responding with one of the phrases in the list.

For example: ***Thanks for helping me with my luggage. You're welcome.***

Finally, put the pieces of paper with the phrases face down on the desk. Take it in turns to pick one up and say something so that the other person responds with the word on the paper.

24. Phrasal verb recast

Language Focus: Phrasal verbs

This is a particularly useful activity for ESP or EAP learners. It is also suitable for learners who are able to speak and/ or write formal or technical English but have had little experience using a more informal register.. A few years ago, I gave private lessons to a lawyer from Pakistan. His command of legal English was far better than mine, however, his conversation was stilted, formal. long-winded and curiously old-fashioned.

In this activity, you will need to use a document written in formal English. Letters, emails or marketing materials are fine. With the learner, go through the document and underline the verbs used. Then, ask your student if they know any phrasal verbs with have a similar meaning. For example, I will collect the samples at 8am could be rewritten as I will pick up the samples at 8am. If the learner struggles with this, you can teach them the phrasal verbs (I say teach but all you have to do is show them that the proper verb has a phrasal verb equivalent).

Now, to make this a speaking activity, tell the learner that they are going to phone you and communicate the information in the document orally. Give them a few minutes to note down the key points but ask them to write phrasal verbs rather than the original verbs.

Then, have the conversation and encourage your learner to make their language as 'natural' as possible.

25. Where do you see yourself in 5 years' time?

Most adult learners who choose to take private classes will have a particular objective. They may want to pass an exam or improve their English for work purposes. Being able to present yourself confidently and fluently in a job interview is a practical skill and most learners will benefit from this activity. Remember that they may also be employers themselves so they can also learn how to interview somebody in English.

If you are teaching a professional person, remember that they may have much more experience than you in the corporate sector. Therefore, you won't be required to teach them what questions are asked in an interview as they will probably know them. What you need to do is show them how these questions are asked in English. It's mainly about reformulation.

So, start by asking your learner to draw up a list of interview questions. You may want to write them down so they can concentrate on forming these questions. Then, look at the list of questions with your learner and reformulate them so they can learn how you say them in English.

With this list, you can then take it in turns to interview each other. Ask your learner to think of a job and discuss what qualities and experience interviewers would look for in the applicants. You could even let your learner interview you for a position in their company! Or think of an unusual job (dog hairdresser, President of their country) and have fun with the interview.

To make this activity really useful for your learner, you should write notes on their language they use to answer your questions. Then, reformulate so they have a record of useful phrases for interviews. In the same way, when your learner interviews you, ask them to

record any phrases they hear you use (or record yourself and listen back) and discuss what they mean and how to use them.

26. If I ruled the world

Language Focus: Unreal conditionals (2nd,3rd, mixed)

Human beings love to imagine what we would do in somebody else's shoes. We always think we could do a better job than people in powerful positions. This fun activity gives our learners the chance to do just that: imagine what they would do if they were in power. It's also a great way to practise using unreal conditionals (second, third, mixed).

Ask the learner to tell you what the main social problems are in their country. Even the most loyal patriot will find things to complain about. Use that list (high unemployment, education system, lack of respect for old people, too much graffiti, the way young people behave, drugs, high crime, too much celebrity gossip etc.) as the basis for the activity.

Then, tell your learner that they have been chosen as a presidential candidate and they have to deliver their message to the electorate. In other words, they have to think about what they would do if they were president. To make the activity more interactive and authentic, you could play the role of a TV interviewer.

If I were president, I would raise taxes for rich people and put this money into hospitals and schools.

You can adapt this activity by changing the role of president to mayor, principal, CEO, manager of local football team.

27. Resolving Disputes

Language Focus: Conditionals used in negotiating, rejecting ideas

This simulation is ideal for practising phrases we use to give opinions, agree and disagree with opinions, offer, accept and reject possible solutions.

As children, we have problems with our parents, teachers, siblings and friends. As adults, this list grows and we have disputes about a wider range of issues: work, marriage, education of our children, business deals, financial services. Phew!!! Life is nothing but a series of battles.

Create a scenario which is relevant to your learner. For example, if they work for a company, the dispute could be based around promotion or a salary increase. If they are university students, the dispute could be about a student grant. If they have children, the dispute could be about a behavioural issue at their school.

When you have decided upon the scenario, choose roles. For example, you, the teacher, could be the boss and your learner could be a disgruntled employee, angry because they haven't received their annual bonus.

Then, individually, answer these questions:

1. What is the cause of the dispute?
2. What is my objective for having this conversation?
3. What am I prepared to offer to make sure I get what I want?
4. What will I not do to get what I want?
5. Am I prepared to change my objective? If so, how much?

When both sides are ready (you might want to set up this scenario at the end of one class and ask the learner to prepare their strategy at home), you can begin the simulation. It can be difficult to participate in a simulation and make notes about the learner's use of language at the same time but try to do so or record it and play it back and analyse the language used with your learner.

When you have reached a decision, ask a few questions about how the learner felt performing the simulation. Praise them for holding their own in a negotiation with a fluent English speaker. Provide feedback on your learner's performance and make sure you do some correction of incorrect language and identify and identify any useful language they emerged in the task.

With high-level learners who enjoy the activity, you can suggest 'Speed dispute resolution' in which you and the learner have a series of disputes with a 5 minute time limit to resolve each one. Have a feedback slot of 1 or 2 minutes after each mini-dispute and correct a couple of errors and/or introduce useful phrases each time. Then, move onto the next scenario and your learner will be given an immediate opportunity to use the corrected or new phrase.

28. To Do List

Language Focus: Causative verbs

Write a reminder note on your hand before starting the class. Just something short like 'get my hair cut'. Start discussing techniques for remembering things we have to do or get done.

See if your learner knows how to use causative verbs (to get something done / to have something done) when one person helps to make something happen for another person. I have to get my hair cut (somebody will do it for me) not I have to cut my hair (I do it myself).

Ask your learner to tell you about an important event that will happen soon in their life. They may have to attend a conference, organise a party, attend a wedding, go on holiday. If they don't have anything planned, get them to imagine something that requires organisation.

Then, get them to create a To Do List. This can be done verbally, in note form or a combination of both. Make sure you correct the learner if they don't use a causative verb when it would be appropriate.

To consolidate, tell your learner that you will help them get things done and decide together how you will share the tasks.

With Business English learners, you could expand this activity and create a To Do List for a specific project and work together as project managers, delegating tasks to members of your team or contractors.

29. Company Policy

Language Focus: Modals for permission, obligation, prohibition etc.

A company policy is a document that establishes the rules of conduct within an organisation. Most companies and institutions have company policies so adult learners will be familiar with them. When we create a common policy, we use modal verbs of obligation (must), permission (may), advice and suggested actions (should) as well as a series of phrases such as 'allowed to' or 'forbidden to' and more complex structures such as 'in no circumstances' or 'under no condition'.

In this activity, you work with your learner to create a company policy. If you are teaching in-company, you might ask your learner to 'translate' their policy into English. You could create a company with your learner and develop a policy for your imaginary business. With other learners, you could create a policy for the classroom 'The teacher must not chew gum in class' or you could choose a role they have in real-life (maybe they are a parent, a child, a boyfriend) and ask them to create a policy outlining the rules and regulations in the relationships they have with other people. A fun way of doing this is by creating a prenuptial agreement (a contract couples create before they get married). You could also create a code of conduct for citizens of their country or city.

30. You're the Teacher

Language Form: Unreal Conditionals (2nd,3rd, mixed)

This is an activity you could do at the end of your course with a private student and is a great way to get feedback on your teaching as well as giving the learner the opportunity to practise conditionals.

Ask your learner to tell you what they would do if they were the teacher of this class. They may feel a bit uncomfortable talking about this in such a direct way so you could rephrase it by asking them to imagine that they are the teacher and that you are a student, studying their language.

You could use a set of questions such as:

1. How would you plan the lessons?
2. How would you correct me?
3. How often would you correct me?
4. Would you use a coursebook?
5. Would you give me homework?
6. Would you teach me grammar?
7. How would you get me to speak more?
8. What resources would you use?
9. Where would you have the class?
10. What would you recommend I do to improve?

When I have done this activity with learners, I have been amazed by their insights. We must never forget that our best resource is our learners and we can learn so much from them about life, language and learning.

Thank you for reading this e-book. Your support means a lot to me and I'd love to hear from you if you use any of these activities. Many of these activities have also been used with groups with some small modifications.

I sincerely believe that it is possible to teach without a coursebook and with very few (if any) materials. Every learner brings their life experiences, views, opinions, hopes and dreams, sense of humour, and, last but not least, some knowledge of the English language to the lesson.

By using what they already have, we are able to make our lessons stimulating, creative, useful and relevant to our learners' lives.

Finally, feel free to share this ebook with friends and colleagues and any promotion on Facebook or Twitter would be appreciated.

Cheers,

Dylan



Online TEFL Training

No-nonsense, fat-free Online TEFL advice

Go to www.onlinetefltraining.com and join our growing community of English teachers.