

CONVERSATION STRATEGIES & ACTIVITIES

Question & Answer

Find Someone Who – A list of characteristics, providing space for a name in front of each characteristic: i.e. _____ drives a truck. Students walk around the room to find only one person who fits each characteristic and write the person's name on their paper. When paper is filled out or time is called, the activity ends. Small groups can follow up and discuss their results.

* Conversation Grids – A chart guiding students to ask a series of questions, listen to answers and record information on a grid for as many people as the grid allows. This activity is independently interactive, authentic, and can be used with any topic and increase students' knowledge of language structures and/or vocabulary. Small groups can follow up and discuss their results.

Information Gap - In pairs or small groups, each student has information the others do not. Collaboratively, group members ask & answer questions or share information to "fill in the gaps" so all information is understood.

Question Cards or Sheets – Can be organized by topic, grammatical structures, etc.

Small Groups – One student chooses a card and asks the entire group or the student next to him/her. Questions are answered. Encourage follow-up questions.

Card Exchange – Ideal for 8+ students. Each student receives one card, (all cards have different questions). After 2 people ask/answer each other's questions, they exchange cards, and repeat procedure with a different student, even if student is asked the same question. Avoid writing yes/no questions.

Line Ups – Ideal for 8+ students. Each student receives one card, (all cards have different questions or topics). Students form two lines facing each other, sitting or standing. Ask & answer questions with person they are facing. After 30 seconds call "time" or "switch." Each student then moves clockwise one place to talk with new person.

Interviews - Students interview each other and report back to class or small groups on a variety of topics.

Question & Answer Cont.

**“Talking Cards”* – Students ask and answer questions using a deck of playing cards. Using a grid or question card, (for each suit in a deck of cards), small groups (ideally 4) shuffle cards including jokers and place in face down on table. Students take turns, moving clockwise, and drawing cards while others ask questions according to number and suit. If a Joker is drawn, student must make up a question.

* Games - Create or download a variety of games where students roll a die, movie spaces to form sentences, form questions and/or ask & answer questions. Depending on level can adapt: Charades; Scattegories; Jeopardy; Wheel of Fortune, etc.

Magazines & Pictures

Picture Differences – 1) Student pairs receive 2 magazine pictures presenting similar situations (i.e. different emotions, office) and discuss what pictures have in common and how they differ. 1) Students pairs receive a picture almost identical to that of his/her partner but differ in various details. Without looking at each other's pictures, students describe their pictures. When pairs believe they have identified all the differences, they compare pictures.

Picture Discussion – Students are presented with a picture or picture story. Related vocabulary & questions are posed or given to small groups to discuss. Groups tell the story with each person in the group contributing at least 2 sentences. Follow up with role play and/or problem-posing questions for groups to decide what to say and what to do.

* Likes & Dislikes – Students student pull one picture of something they like and one picture of something they don't like from a magazine, form small groups, and discuss what photos were chosen and why. When finished, ask groups to share a few of their photos. Follow up with each group creating a story, in sequence, using all their photos. Have students practice telling their story (round robin style) to present to the rest of the class. May also incorporate grammatical structures: past, future

Interpreting Pictures/Photos – Small groups receive the same picture or photo and create a story. This can be done round-robin style so every student has an opportunity to contribute. Have students practice telling their story (round robin style) to present to the rest of the class.

Magazines & Pictures Cont.

What is Happening? - Students receive a picture of a scene where there is a lot going on and form questions in the present progressive for other students to answer and/or simply discuss the picture.

Picture Story Scramble – Individual members in a group are given different frames of a story to sequence together with the goal of telling a story.

Partner Puzzle – In pairs, one student receives a complete picture which must not be shown to partner. The other student gets the same picture cut up in pieces. The first student tells the second how to arrange the pieces. Neither student is allowed to see what the other is doing.

Picture Dictation – In pairs or small groups, a student describes a picture while the others draw it. Those drawing may ask questions about the picture, but is not allowed to see it while drawing.

People (Places & Things)

Character Study - Students receive a picture (same or different) of people who show some character, not fashion models. ☺ Students discuss and provide their “story:” age, occupation, interests, problems in life, ambitions, family background, education, etc. Pictures can then be exchanged with groups (if different). Afterward, the groups can compare notes.

Celebrity Comparisons – Students make comparisons using 2-3 celebrity pictures. Some characteristics to compare & contrast include: size, beauty, talent, skills, popularity, etc.

**Guess Who?* – A 12 square grid is provided with faces, (items or places) with letters up & down (A, B, C, D) and numbers across (1, 2, 3). Students take turns giving descriptions while the others guess letter/number combination to identify square described, (i.e. A1, B3). Follow up describing people in class.

Categorizing

Provide a list of related items and are asked to put into categories: *very useful/useful/not useful; positive/negative; healthy/unhealthy; fun/not fun; easy/difficult; objects into physical characteristic categories (hard, soft, smooth, plastic, square, gold, black, etc.).*

Rating

Small groups or pairs generate (or receive) a list of related words and criteria by which to rank them, (i.e. most important things in life, subjects to study in school, ways to make money, places to travel).

Make a list of household apparatus/machines/gadgets we use at home to make life easier and rate them including reasons why.

Surveys

*Students receive a survey card with 3 related questions. Choose a subject (education, annoying habits, food) and prepare a variety of 3-questions cards. Form small groups where students can share the results of their surveys.

Tasks & Projects

Plan & shop for a weekly menu
Design and furnish a room/house
Plan a vacation
Create your own community
Design & create your own company

Tower of Babel - Build a paper tower with one person each holding one implement that only he/she can "operate" during the construction of the tower. Provide negotiating vocabulary/expressions

Role Play & Problem Solving

Suggested Topics: *advice, health, work, social situations, family conflicts, complaints, explanations, invitations, telephone calls, school, calling in sick, making appointments*

Situation/Role Cards: A variety of role playing cards are assigned to students who assume a "role," thinking and speaking in that character's identity. A situation can also be assigned where a small group decides who the characters are and act out accordingly.

For and Against – Groups receive a list of controversial issues. Everyone should decide if they are "for" or "against" the issue and explain "why" or "why not."
Example language: I'm for ... because...; I'm against it because ...

Debates – Two groups represent opposing sides of an issue. Once each group discusses their ideas to support their side, a facilitator records the ideas on the board, (i.e. Tobacco industry, farmers & smokers vs. doctors & non-smokers debate: Should cigarettes be banned?)

Role Play & Problem Solving Cont.

Making Group Decisions – Each person in a group is given a card with a different option related to a scenario. The group must discuss the different options & opinions and come to a consensus.

Example 1: Planning a vacation – Caribbean Beach; hiking in the mountains, a spa ...

Example 2: Purchasing a home – condo in city, house in country, townhouse...

Example 3: Choosing a restaurant: Mexican, Italian, American, Chinese ...

Dear Abby – Provide short versions of Dear Abby letters/problems.

Problem Cards – Problem cards are provided to or created by students and a short list of expressions used to give advice: *If I were you I would; Why don't you; I think you should.* Students can choose cards in pile or walk around room stating problem while others give advice. Identify at least 3 pieces of advice.

Discussions

Oral Histories - Students describe various aspect of their lives, present, past and future: the house they grew up in; the home of someone they loved; favorite meals from childhood, (who was at the table, what was eaten, who served, who ate first, who shopped, who cooked, who cleaned up); where family members slept & who they slept with.

Predicting the Future – Students fill out strips of paper predicting what they will or will not do in the future. Put all “predictions” in a bowl. Using a ‘Magic 8 Ball’ or creating a spinner with answers, students choose a strip of paper and form the question about their future, (Will I ...?). The answer is revealed by shaking the ball or using the spinner. With more advanced students, call follow-up with fortune cookies discussing what the fortunes mean.

Horoscopes - Students ask & answer questions about horoscopes. In pairs, each student can have a different set of questions. Follow up by reading current or past horoscopes and discussing their validity.

*Manners & Social Customs/Rules – Cards or a worksheet is filled out by topics related to manners and/or social customs or rules. A lot of discussion will be generated and shared by all. Topic include: being embarrassed, names, hugging, kissing, feet, being close, joking, groups, smoking, eating, being on time, gestures, etc.

Discussions cont.

At the Movies – Small groups discuss basic questions about movies. Groups or individuals create riddles to share for others to guess. Groups are given worksheets to dissect a movie in preparation to talk about the movie (genre, actors, setting, plot, climax, ending).

Advanced Conversation Wheel – A wheel or card are prepared with up to 16 topics (food, religion, government, money, vacation, friends, family, marriage, health insurance, etc.). Six starter sentences (representing each number on a die) are also provided separately to be used when starting a discussion. Each student spins or chooses a topic card, and then rolls the die. He/she then begins the discussing the topic using the starter sentence represented on the die: i.e. *This is what I like about health insurance In the U.S. I would like to tell you a story about health insurance.* Listeners should be encouraged to ask follow-up questions.

What's Your Opinion – Cards are prepared by teacher or students with questions or topics around controversial issues: Can begin each question with: What do you think about ___? Should ___? What is the more difficult ___ or ___?

Other Conversation Strategies

Incorporate necessary conversation strategies - Students are given a short list of expressions or words to use during a discussion, role play or task. *Suggestions:* follow-up questions; asking for clarification; echoing instructions; discussion connectors, expressing opinions politely, etc.

Present small lists of like expressions - students use expressions by finishing sentences or presenting situations for students to respond to, i.e. For “pet peeves,” It bugs me, It bothers me, It drives me crazy, It annoys me when

*Adapt activities using textbooks & the internet – Instead of re-inventing activities, pull from textbook content and create your own activities, i.e. useful expression and conversation grids, etc. and adapt them to the level of your students.

Useful Resources for ESL Conversation Activities

A Conversation Book 2: English in Everyday Life by Tina Kasloff Carver and Sandra Douglas Fotinos, Prentice Hall Regents, 1998.

Back & Forth: Photocopiable Cooperative Pair Activities for Language Development by Adrian S. Palmer, Theodore S. Rodgers, and Judy Winn-Bell Olsen, Alta Book Center Publishers, 1999.

Basics in Speaking: Activities for Building Conversations by Michael Rost, Longman Asia ELT, 1998, 2001.

Cathy's Cards: Instant Conversation in the Classroom by Cathy Jo Seitchik Diaz, Alta Book Center Publishers, 2002.

Conversational Inspirations by Nancy Ellen Zelman, Pro Lingua, 1986, 1996, 2005.

Conversation Strategies by David Kehe and Peggy Dustin Kehe, Pro Lingua, 1994, 2004.

Discussions that work: Task-centred fluency practice by Peggy Ur, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 1981.

First Discussion Starters: Speaking Fluency Activities for Lower-Level ESL/EFL Students by Keith S. Folse, Ph.D. and Jeanine Ivone, The University of Michigan Press, 2002.

Grammar Games: Cognitive affective and drama activities for EFL students by Mario Rinvolutri, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 1984.

Grammar Practice Activities: A practical guide for teachers by Penny Ur, Cambridge University Press, 2007, 1988.

In My Opinion: A Photocopyable collection of Opinion Gap Discussion Topics by Phil Keegan, Pro Lingua Associates, 2009.

It's Time To Talk! 101 Pages of Questions for Communication and Fluency by Elisa Doyle, ESL Resources, 2000.

Just Joking: Stories for Listening and Discussion by Sandra Heyer, Pearson Education, 2005.

Keep Talking: Communicative fluency activities for Language Teaching by Friederike Klippel, Cambridge University Press, 1984, 2007.

Look Who's Talking: Activities for Group Interaction by Sharron Bassano and Mary Ann Christianson, Alta Book Center Publishers, 1995.

Spot the Differences by David DeRocco and Jan Tufford, FULL BLAST Productions, 1997.

Springboards: Communication Starters by Richard Yorkey, Alta Book Center Publishers, 2004, (1984 by Addison Wesley Publishers).

Talk-A-Tivities: Problem Solving and Puzzles for Pairs by Richard Yorkey, Addison Wesley Publishing Company, 1985.

Talk Your Head Off (...and Write, Too!) by Brana Rish West, Prentice Hall Regents, 1997.

Topics from A to Z, Book 1: Steps to Success in Listening and Speaking by Irene E. Schoenberg, Pearson Education, 2005.

Websites

<http://iteslj.org/questions/> -- (Conversation questions by topic)

<http://iteslj.org/Lessons/> <http://a4esl.org>

http://www.esljunction.com/conversation_questions/

<http://www.eslgold.com/speaking.html>

<http://www.rong-chang.com/lsnplan.htm>

<http://www.bogglesworldesl.com> -- (Board games & more!)

<http://www.eslpartyland.com/teachers/nov/conv.html>

<http://esl.about.com> -- (English Conversation Skills)

<http://english-zone.com/teach/pdf-files/convo-cards.pdf> -- (Conversation Cards)

http://www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/Health/healthindex.html -- (Picture Stories)

<http://www.azargrammar.com/materials/index.html> -- (free materials to download, including worksheets contributed by teachers & the complete text of *Fun with Grammar* by Suzanne Woodward.