



# **ENGLISH TEACHING FORUM ARTICLES**

## Classroom Activities

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### Summer Vacation Comics

**Level:** Upper Beginner/Lower Intermediate

**Time required:** 60–75 minutes

**Goals:** To become familiar with vocabulary related to vacation locations, foods, and activities; to practice expressing wants and wishes by using “want to”

**Materials:** chalk and chalkboard, or markers and whiteboard; large pieces of paper for comic posters; colored pencils or crayons

**Background:** Summer is hot in most parts of the United States. Schools close, and many people take family vacations. Some travel, while others participate in leisure activities in their hometowns. During summer vacations, people might play sports, sightsee, go on walks, or read books. They go on picnics in parks or on beaches and eat summer treats, including ice cream and fresh fruit.

#### Preparation:

1. Establish three stations for brainstorming vocabulary. These can be sections of a whiteboard or chalkboard, or

large pieces of paper posted around the classroom. Label these stations 1, 2, and 3. Assign a vacation vocabulary topic to each station: Station 1 = vacation locations, Station 2 = vacation foods, Station 3 = vacation activities.

2. To create comic grids for the second part of the activity, use one large piece of paper for each group of 3–5 students. On each piece of paper, draw two perpendicular lines to form four boxes, which students will use to draw their comics. (Alternatively, groups can make their own grids by drawing lines on their paper during the lesson.)

#### Procedures:

1. Write the word *vacation* on the board. Ask students if they have ever been on a vacation or fun family trip. Create interest and activate students' background knowledge by asking several students to share information in response to your questions: “Where did you go on vacation? When did you go on vacation? What did you do on vacation? What foods did you eat on vacation?” Write students' ideas on the board. (If your students are not familiar with the concept of “being on vacation,” you may want to present

information from the Background section in an interactive, level-appropriate way.)

2. Tell students they are going to plan their own vacations, but first they need to review and pre-prepare vocabulary to talk about vacations.
3. Divide the class into three groups by having students count off from 1 to 3. Ask students to move to the station matching their group number. Have groups choose one person to be a recorder who will write down the group's ideas.
4. Tell the groups they will have two minutes for a timed brainstorm; they will write down as many words for their topic—locations, foods, or activities—as possible. (You can adjust the time based on the students' level; lower-level students may need less time.) Remind students that all ideas are acceptable during brainstorming. Recorders will write the group's list on their section of the board or on a large sheet of paper. Start the brainstorm and circulate among the groups. If groups have problems coming up with ideas, provide prompts ("Do you eat hot food or cold food in summer?") or mime (pretend to read or swim).
5. When time is up, have groups rotate to the next station. At the new station, students review the first group's list, help each other with the meaning of unknown items, and add their own ideas with another timed brainstorm.

Groups rotate once more to brainstorm at the final stations.

If a rotating brainstorming session is impractical in your classroom, have groups stay at one station and generate as many words as possible within the time limit. Review the three lists with the whole class and address any unfamiliar items, as previously described. Ask the class to contribute more items to each list.

6. After students return to their seats, address any remaining vocabulary questions. Alternatively, the student who brainstormed the item in question can explain it using words, gestures, or a drawing. Display the three vocabulary lists during the next part of the activity.
7. Tell students they will make a comic that explains their vacation plans in pictures and in words. Provide an example on the board: draw a comic grid, then draw three people in the upper left box. (Don't worry! You don't have to be a wonderful artist. If you don't want to draw, ask student volunteers to draw for you.) Ask students, "What are their names?" Write a caption based on the students' response: "Hi. We are Maria, Dimitri, and Tareq." Next, ask the class where they want to go on vacation. Pick one response and draw something that represents the location in the upper right box; write a caption under the picture: "We want to go to the beach for vacation." Complete the last two boxes, one for vacation foods and one for activities; make sure the captions use the "We want to \_\_\_\_\_ (on vacation)" structure. When the comic

is complete, ask the class to come up with a title, such as “Our Vacation” or “Summer Vacation.”

8. Highlight the “want to” form by asking students if they notice anything that is the same in the last three captions. Underline *want to* in each caption. If necessary, ask concept-checking questions about the meaning of “want to.” Finally, elicit or supply the question forms associated with the last three captions: “Where do you want to go? What foods do you want to eat? What do you want to do?” Write each question on the board next to the corresponding box.
9. Divide the class into groups of 3–5 students. Distribute comic grids (or large pieces of paper, if groups will create their own grids) and colored pencils or crayons. If necessary, provide instructions on how to create the grids.
10. Tell the class they will plan imaginary vacations: students can go anywhere they want, choose foods to eat, and pick activities to enjoy. Using the vocabulary lists created earlier in the activity, groups should discuss options and agree on a vacation plan. Groups will illustrate their plan using the comic grids and make captions for each box, following the pattern in the model comic. You can provide partial captions to support less proficient students. For example, the caption in the first box introducing the group might read: “Hi. We are \_\_\_\_\_ (names).”

The other captions might be:

- “We want to go to \_\_\_\_\_ (place).”
- “We want to eat \_\_\_\_\_ (foods).”
- “We want to \_\_\_\_\_ (activities).”

11. Have groups share their vacation plans. If your classroom space allows, create stations around the room and send two groups to each station. (If you have limited space, have groups present to the groups sitting close to them.) Each group will present its vacation comic to the other. After both groups at each station have shared, one group will remain at the station while the other group rotates to another station. Continue the rotation to give groups several chances to present and listen; ask a different person to speak for the group each time. Circulate to monitor students’ output and provide assistance. If you want, at the end of the activity you can ask one or two groups with unique plans to present their comic to the whole class.

You can also turn the presentations into interactive conversations or interviews. Have the “audience” group ask the presenting group about their comic: “Where do you want to go on vacation? What do you want to do on vacation? What foods do you want to eat on vacation?” (Writing these questions on the board as part of the model comic will assist lower-level students.)

Display the comics in the classroom. Besides showcasing students’ work, you can use the posters as visual aids when reviewing vocabulary items in future lessons.

## Variation

To limit the focus to one or two categories of vacation vocabulary, reduce the number of boxes in the comic or have students draw multiple frames related to the selected category or categories. For example, students might draw one frame showing their group in a vacation location and three frames representing activities they want to do during their trip.

## Tools for Activating Materials and Tasks in the English Language Classroom

Rick Rosenberg

**M**ost teachers have seen the reactions students can have to tasks and activities that they do not find engaging: the glassy or rolling eyes, the unfocused behavior, and the cries of “Not again!” This article provides practical techniques that my students have helped me learn over the years to better “activate” materials and tasks in the English language classroom while tapping into students’ interests, needs, and aims. Activation techniques, then, are tools to make materials and tasks more interactive and more learner-focused, encouraging students to take more responsibility for their own learning. This article demonstrates activating techniques through three strategies: elicitation, gapping, and adaptation/ extension.

### Elicitation

Elicitation is the process of drawing out something, of provoking a response. Using elicitation as a questioning strategy in the language classroom focuses discussion on the learners—on their ideas, opinions, imagination, and involvement. Classroom discussions that use elicitation as a technique allow students to draw on what they know—on existing schemata/scaffolding—and provide for a rich sharing of ideas within a sociocultural context (Huong 2003). Graves (in Nunan 2003) points out that elicitation, “because

it emphasizes learners’ experience and knowledge,” helps “to take the focus off of the text as the source of authority and helps learners become more self-reliant” (237). Elicitation is also an excellent lead-in to many other activities that exercise critical thinking and inquiry (Ngeow and Kong 2003). As illustration, here are two elicitation activities: extended brainstorming and a top-down vocabulary elicitation game.

### Extended brainstorming

Brainstorming has but one rule: there is no such thing as a mistake. Anything goes; all ideas are equal and welcome. To practice brainstorming, teachers should draw on topics that students know and care about. As a teacher, I have always enjoyed learning about student interests, aims, and cultures through Fri-erian problem-posing, through collaboration and negotiation, and by focusing on loaded, culturally significant topics (Kabilan 2000; Englander 2002).

With a Frierian problem-posing approach, the classroom focus moves from a “banking model,” where “memorization and regurgitation” and “right answers” are emphasized, to a learning environment where students are asked to reflect critically, where exploration is encouraged, and where there are multiple ways to construct solutions to problems (Serendip

2003). When I was a teacher in training at a secondary school in the United States, my students taught me the importance of negotiating topics and activities to make them more relevant to students' needs and interests. I was teaching a large, mixed-level, mixed-background English as a Second Language (ESL) class, and the textbook often left the students uninterested and feeling that the lesson was irrelevant. Many expressed this disconnect by not paying attention and by engaging in behaviors disruptive to other students. So, instead of going page by page through the textbook, I had the students reflect and ask questions about the subject matter to link to topics they knew and cared about studying, such as low-rider cars, something most of the students had a high level of interest and expertise in. We covered much of the same language-learning content of the chapter in the textbook—which was on travel by car—but we did it through focus on a topic the students truly cared about discussing. The interest was such that the students enthusiastically “published” their own handwritten and typed newsletters, which they posted in the classroom and shared with other students. And if your students are not excited about cars, other topics could include regional or traditional foods, activities, hobbies, or current events.

The first step in the process of brainstorming is to elicit responses from students as a group. Students should be encouraged to respond quickly with the first things that come to mind and to call them out to be included together on a map on the board. As the students give their responses, the teacher can help them see

the connections between the generated vocabulary—producing a mind map that links like terms together—by circling key concepts and drawing lines to connect circles.

After the teacher has mapped out the brainstorm, the next step is to ask students to take on the roles of investigative journalists and look at the various facets of the topic under examination through these primary questions:

**WHAT?**  
**WHO?**  
**WHERE?**  
**WHEN?**  
**HOW?**  
**WHY?**

Students work in groups to brainstorm the topic and one or more of the investigative questions. Depending on the size of the class, I might have each group work with one question word, or one group work with WHAT and WHO and another with WHERE and WHEN, and so forth. But it is important that the groups share the results and that WHY questions—or the WHY group—be last, as WHY is the existential question, the question that requires highest-order thinking skills. This overall approach allows the class to investigate findings together, come to conclusions, and perhaps develop thesis statements for potential writing projects.

The activity generates a list of vocabulary items and/or questions. About the topic of “falafel,” for example, students could generate either a list of words or questions in relation to WHAT (*What is it? What does it*



*look like, smell like, taste like, feel like, or sound like while you eat it? What are the ingredients?).* The brainstorm can generate questions that the students answer later, and/or a list of words or phrases that link the topic with WHAT. WHO typically generates questions such as *Who is involved in eating or preparing falafel?* and related questions such as *How wide is the distribution of people who partake in the phenomenon of falafel? Do people of all ages and social standing know about falafel?* WHERE and WHEN generate questions and vocabulary about locations where falafel is made (*Where is it made? Where is it most popular?*) and contextualize the times and rituals associated with it (*When do people typically eat it?*). The HOW questions help students focus on processes: *How is falafel made? How is it eaten? How often does one eat it?* Finally, WHY helps students understand how to organize their research and agree upon conclusions: *Why is falafel such a popular food? What research findings from the other questions support the conclusion?* As this “WHY” example shows, students are free to add follow-up questions that do not necessarily begin with the same question word; the key is that the questions will lead to an investigation of the topic.

What results from this collaborative effort is a focused, collaborative look at a topic, a preliminary way to organize a great deal of material (the falafel brainstorm might generate a thesis such as, “Falafel is a popular traditional food in the Middle East because it is cheap, tasty, and quick to eat”) and establish the basis for writing class publications/newsletters and cross-cultural exchange projects. These publications

can be handwritten, typed, or printed on paper, or they can be published via email, blogs, social networking sites, or other online forums (see <http://oelp.uoregon.edu/learn.html> for examples of keypal and cross-cultural exchange sites). Because students are interested in the topic to begin with, they naturally want to learn more about it and are eager to share what they learn.

### Elicitation vocabulary games

Another way elicitation can help students develop questioning skills and strategies is through vocabulary games. The one my students have particularly enjoyed has many permutations. In the game, a student or group of students elicits from other students a list of words headed by a title concept. A typical vocabulary set could be about nouns—for example, *Things in a School: blackboards, students, teachers, desks, pencils, erasers, chalk, textbooks*. A vocabulary set could also be defined by the first letter of the words or by rhyme, such as Words That Start with “B”: *boys, book, bicycle, bird, big, blue* and Words That Rhyme with “Eye”: *I, my, cry, high, lie, buy, why*. The set could include actions: *Things to Do at School: study, discuss, explain, write, read, listen, learn, teach*. It could be a more complex list of emotions: *happiness, sadness, loneliness, frustration, surprise, relief*. The number of the words in a list can vary; rules and difficulty can be adjusted for student level. The pedagogic value of the task is in the amount of involvement and practice that the students experience. Typically, the topic and the list of items appear on a



card; in pairs or small groups, students try to elicit the vocabulary items on their card from their partner or others in their small group, or from the whole class.

To get the game started, the teacher can demonstrate by using a card that has a topic with vocabulary items that should be familiar to the students; the teacher gives clues so that the class can guess each of the words on the list. Topics can be of general interest or drawn from a recent lesson or class unit. The idea is to foster oral communication, so all clues should be given verbally—no pointing, gesturing, or mimicking an action—with a set time limit, typically one to three minutes. While demonstrating how the game works, the teacher should pattern the interaction before students work together, illustrating elicitation strategies such as the following:

- Giving definitions (what something is or is not);
- Providing attributes (large, small, red, square);
- Giving functions (used for X; not used for doing Y);
- Comparing or contrasting;
- Providing a word that the target word rhymes with;
- Telling what letter the word starts or ends with (if the students get stuck).

Students get their cards, with a topic and a list of vocabulary items, then prepare and practice in pairs or small groups to give clues that will elicit the vocabulary from the rest of the class—or, more precisely, from the other groups. In large classes, limiting the guesses to one per group helps all groups listen more carefully; it also prevents groups from shouting

out random guesses, and it forces the speaker to continue providing information about the target word so that groups can gain confidence that their one guess is correct. Another option is to keep a tally of points each group scores as it successfully elicits the vocabulary items from the other groups.

At first, the teacher will have to prepare cards showing the topic and the list of vocabulary items to be elicited, but once the students learn the rules and have practiced eliciting successfully, the next step is to have the students write their own vocabulary cards, essentially creating the content of the game. Students at different levels of proficiency can come up with their own topics and make their own cards by listing words for each topic. Students can draw subject matter for the cards from vocabulary and topics covered in class as well as from topics of interest. Collaboratively developing their own cards and elicitation strategies allows the students to reflect on what they know and to use critical-thinking skills to order their vocabulary. It also helps the students take the lead in their own learning, to write and help construct materials. And those materials help the teacher, too; as the students produce a portfolio with more and more cards, the teacher can keep a copy of the new materials to use as review or to use with other classes.

## Gapping

*Gapping* refers to the authentic purpose for communication: transferring information, or bridging the gap, from one person

to another. In a language classroom, using gapping activities means that each learner needs to negotiate, collaborate, and exchange information toward a common goal. Gapping also provides variety and fosters group work with existing readings and materials. As illustration, we can look at three gapped activities: Riddle Schmooze, Monster Madness, and Grids Galore. These activities can be modified to integrate additional vocabulary, prompt a new lesson, or review grammar.

### Riddle Schmooze

To “schmooze” is to exchange information, or to chat informally; to come up with a gapped schmooze activity, one needs to have pieces or parts to complete a communicative act. Participants might have parts of a picture and need to find complementary pieces to make a whole. Or they may have different sections of a printed text (sometimes referred to as a jigsaw reading). Schmooze activities provide students with an opportunity to move about a room, make some (communicative) noise, and practice different registers: for instance, how to greet someone and how to politely interrupt ongoing conversations (e.g., “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to ask your assistance”; “I’m sorry to bother you ...”; “Hey, dog/dude/man, give me a hand!”).

To begin the riddle schmooze activity, the teacher gives each student two slips of paper. On one is a riddle question and on the other is an answer—the answer to a different riddle (see Appendix 1). Students have one to three minutes to memorize

both. Then they fold the riddle and answer and give them back to the teacher. Next comes the noisy mayhem of a classroom of English language learners bridging the gap—chatting with other students to find the answer for their riddle and the riddle for their answer. The teacher should give a time limit and have the students sit down as soon as they have found their riddles and answers. In a variation of this activity, instead of riddles, each student can be given a vocabulary word and the definition for a different vocabulary word and asked to match the word to a classmate’s definition and the definition to a classmate’s word. In all cases, students are bridging the gap as they fit pieces of information they have with pieces of their classmates’ information. (With larger classes, the teacher can copy sets of riddles/answers or vocabulary/definition sets and have the students work in groups. For example, a class with 50 students could divide into two to five groups, with each group receiving identical sets of riddles.)

A secondary assignment once students finish schmoozing and sit down is to have them jot down alternative answers to their riddles or come up with any other riddles that they know. When the time is up, the teacher calls the students together and has each student ask his or her riddle to the whole group and goes over the responses. And if riddle answers are not clear to everyone, some students may be able to do the explaining.

Teachers can adapt schmooze activities to work with any question/answer format and with pictures or graphics. And once students have learned how schmoozing

works, they can readily develop schmoozing materials by using class lessons or topics of interest, so that, as with the elicitation vocabulary games described above, students end up generating content for future classes. Whatever the content, schmoozing gap activities provide a fun, interactive way to review vocabulary or practice for a test.

## Monster Madness

In this activity (thanks to Eric Dwyer from Florida International University), students draw a monster using only geometric shapes. The students then pair off, sit back-to-back, and describe what their monsters look like. The students alternate between describing their own monster, and listening to the description of their partner's monster and reproducing it. Preparation for the activity can include reviewing how to describe shapes (square, rectangle, circle, etc.), how to give directions and locations ("Start by drawing a two-centimeter square in the upper left-hand corner; then ..."), or how to compare and contrast ("The circle is twice as large as the square"). For a wrap-up activity, have students summarize how the gapped picture is different from the original. Spin-off activities include having students describe differences in photographs or drawings.

by and for a particular teaching context. Grids also work with a variety of teaching levels. The directions are much like those for Monster Madness: each participant (or group) gives verbal directions to a partner (or other members of the group), who fills in boxes on the grid (that each of the participants has) without showing it to her or his partner(s). The students then compare the original grid with the grids filled in by each listener. The result can take the form of a correct final destination (for example, Box A1), or the result can be a picture that the listeners create by filling in the appropriate squares.

Grids can be almost any size, and it is fine to have students draw the grids themselves to prepare for the activity. Here is one example with varied question content:

I									
H									
G									
F									
E									
D									
C									
B									
A									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9

## Grids Galore

Grids provide many possibilities for gapped speaking practice. They allow the teacher and students to use the format with all kinds of content that is created

## Partner A directions

1. If the past tense of *go* is *gone*, mark an X in the box in A1. However, if the past tense of *go* is *went*, mark an X in the box in A2.

2. If the plural of *tooth* is *tooths*, mark an X two boxes to the right, one box up. But if the plural of *tooth* is *teeth*, mark an X three boxes to the right, two rows up.
3. If the middle name of U.S. President Barack Obama is “Harry,” mark an X on the next box to the right, same row. But if President Obama’s middle name is “Hussein,” mark an X on the next box to the right, one row down.
4. If the plural of *child* is *children*, mark an X six rows up, on the same column. But if the plural of *child* is *childs*, mark an X six rows up, one row to the right.
5. If reading is more fun than singing, mark an X two boxes to the right and four boxes down. If, however, singing is more fun than reading, mark an X three boxes to the left and one box down.
4. If people who don’t eat meat are called *veterinarians*, mark an X in the column to the left, same row. But if people who don’t eat meat are called *vegetarians*, mark an X in the column to the left, two rows up.
5. If English is easier than math, mark an X four boxes to the right, in the same row. If, however, English is more difficult than math, mark an X two boxes to the right, in the same row.

Once students become familiar with grids, even more learning and interactive fun take place when the students write their own grids to practice vocabulary or grammar or to review content covered in class. Valuable interaction and negotiation take place as students practice their listening skills and follow directions—and when they discuss why and how they came up with different solutions or even how the questions could be changed to be clearer or more concise. Open-ended discussion questions (such as in each #5 above) can also be included as springboards for debates or to link to upcoming topics and themes. The communicative value of the activity, then, comes as much as or more from the process (providing added language practice) than from producing the finished, “correct” grid.

### Partner B directions

1. If the past of *see* is *seen*, mark an X in the A1 square. However, if the past of *see* is *saw*, mark an X in the A4 square.
2. If a synonym of *gorgeous* is *beautiful*, mark an X five boxes up and one to the right. But if a synonym of *gorgeous* is *big*, mark an X in the same column, one box up.
3. If falafel is a plant, mark an X one box to the right, one row above. But if falafel is a tasty food, mark an X one box to the right, one row down.

### Extending and adapting

Extending and adapting are techniques that offer a practical way for teachers to draw on realia and authentic materials to spice up classroom activities. Adapting allows for materials to be drawn from unlimited

sources that the students already know and care about. The value of adaptation was illustrated to me many years ago when I noticed how engaged some students in the back of the class were. I thought they were focused and avidly discussing the activity, and I was pleased to see that they were so interested. Upon closer inspection, however, I discovered that the students were engaged in a word game in their native language instead of the activity from the textbook. Instead of criticizing the students for being off-task, I offered them the opportunity to contribute to the lesson by sharing their game. With my assistance, the students then adapted the activity to the content we were studying, thus taking a larger stake in their own learning.

With teachers' guidance, students can readily identify fun formats and adapt them to the classroom. Ideas from board and card games, from local game shows (see Appendix 2), and from puzzles can be applied to learning English. Other possibilities for adapting or extending materials and activities from students' ideas and other resources follow.

## Scenarios and role play

These activities can be used in conjunction with a loaded theme of interest to students. Many students respond to a scene of conflict at work or between parent and child. These scenes or *strategic interactions* (Alatis 1993) can also be taken from a picture or news report, and students can be asked to discuss one role (or one side of an issue) in a small group; they then either elect one student to represent the

group or, better yet, act out the scenario collectively after planning together. This activity is not to be confused with reading aloud a dialog or the parts of a play because in these strategic interactions, no one knows the outcome of the exchange in advance. Students must actively negotiate toward a solution or to clarify the situation. And the activity can be beneficial even if students do not reach a clear-cut solution, as learning occurs throughout the process of performing scenarios, regardless of the outcomes. Teachers can focus on providing language forms (such as modals, expressions, idioms, and verb forms) to help the students prepare for the exercise and, as a wrap-up or debriefing, provide a summary of language-learning points learned or needed. Students can also summarize who they feel "won" the exercise, explain why, and make their own observations on language used or language they needed in order to be more effective in expressing their ideas.

Topics for scenarios can come from students' personal lives, their communication with other students and teachers at school, work environments, or scenes taken from readings or literature. Two scenarios, with role cards for students, appear on this and the following page.

### "Movie Night Out"

#### Daughter (age 13–18)

You would like to go out to a movie with a few of your friends. One of the friends is a boy you are interested in getting to know better. You are worried, however, that your parents may not approve. Try to convince your parents that the boy is trustworthy and that they should let you go out.



## “The Scholarship”

### Mother

You are concerned about the friends your daughter is keeping. You would like her to spend more time on her studies and more time at home. At the same time, you don't want to keep her from enjoying time with her friends. Find out more information from your daughter to determine whether you will grant her permission to go to a movie with her friends.

### Boy

You have decided to drop in and visit your new friend to see if she is able to go to the movies with you and some other friends. When you arrive, you find that your friend and her mother have already been deep in discussion about whether or not your friend will be permitted to go to the movie. Your task is to help your friend's mother feel confident that you are a responsible, trustworthy person.

### Father

You have just returned from work to find your wife deep into a discussion with your daughter and a young man you have never seen before. You are in a hurry to prepare to go back out to a business dinner. Ask each of the members of the discussion to provide a quick summary of what has happened and what they think the decision should be and why. Then discuss with your wife, alone, what the final decision should be.

### Student

You have just been informed that you have been awarded a scholarship to study in the United States for a year. You haven't had much experience traveling alone and have never been outside of your country on your own. Your parents were not very excited about your applying to the program and have told you they are very concerned about your living on your own in another country. Discuss the scholarship with your parents and try to reassure them that you are able to handle living on your own and that the experience will be safe and important for your future studies and career.

### Parents (Father, Mother, or both)

You have just learned that your daughter (or son) has been awarded a scholarship to study in the United States for one year. You are very concerned about her/his safety and the effect that the year away will have on your child's future studies and career. Ask your daughter/son questions to determine whether you will allow her/him to accept the scholarship.

### School Adviser

You have been called to provide advice and counseling to the parents of a student who has won a prestigious scholarship to study in the United States. You want to stress both the challenges and the rewards of studying abroad and to do what you can to assure the parents that schools in the United States take the security of their students very seriously.

## Group presentations, reports, and newscasts

Students take a theme or topic and work together to present their ideas in a cohesive format. They can write individual or group reports and then work together to present to the rest of the class a program, or a newscast, that has an introduction and a conclusion. This activity can be done as a daily or weekly presentation that allows students to share topics of interest. The class can post presentations and reports on blogs, on social networking sites, or as collaborative, cross-cultural exchanges.

While blogs or networking sites would be problematic (or impossible) in contexts where access to the Internet is limited or not available, in-class newscasts can work anywhere, and teachers can incorporate them as a regular feature of their classes. Students, individually or in groups, are responsible for the newscasts on a rotating basis, whether they are done daily or weekly, and take on roles such as reporter, interviewer or interviewee(s), anchorperson, and so on. These roles can change as the group's turn to present the newscast comes around again. Not only do students get opportunities to practice speaking and to use vocabulary they might not otherwise use, but newscasts also give students opportunities to introduce and discuss issues of international, national, local, or schoolwide interest.

## Peer review and publication committees

Student publications can include class newsletters or newspapers for which the

students function as writers, peer editors, and editorial writers. Students identify topics of interest and relevance and do research on their topics. The teacher functions as a co-worker or senior editor on the publication, offering consultation and guidance as needed. The longer and more elaborate the publication, the more time and collaborative effort will be required.

Another option for class newsletters is to publish shorter articles on a class blog ([www.blogger.com](http://www.blogger.com) is one example) or on collaborative, customized social networking websites such as [www.ning.com](http://www.ning.com). For newscasts, students can make live presentations to the class or record their sessions and save them as podcasts or post them as videos on sites such as [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com).

## Student evaluation and practice test writing

Students work in groups to come up with practice quizzes and exercises to review for upcoming tests. The teacher helps the students reflect on what they have learned by prompting them with a list of language objectives reached (from lesson and unit planning, for example) and through guiding the students to compile portfolios to list and share what they have accomplished in class over a set period of time. Students can develop practice activities in the form of elicitation cards, grids, games, or scenarios (as detailed above) or as review questions or language review exercises. Many students enjoy playing the role of



“teacher,” asking questions to the class or developing short quizzes for their peers.

If the class has access to computers, the program Hot Potatoes is an easy-to-learn and fun-to-use tool to draft exercises that will work on any computer or that can be easily posted online (see <http://hotpot.uvic.ca/> to download).

## Conclusion

Activating techniques focus on the students in the classroom, on keeping them involved, on having them *doing* and *producing* rather than *passively receiving* information. This article has described some techniques that my students have helped me learn to better focus the class content and tasks according to their needs. My students have helped by sharing their ideas, interests, and aims and by being engaged members in collaborative learning. I have learned that through the strategies of elicitation, gapping, and extension/adaption, students interact more, construct solutions together, and have the tools to draw on to not only receive an education but to participate in and contribute to that education.

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## APPENDIX 1: Riddle Schmooze

Here is a starter set of riddle questions and answers. Remember, at the start of this activity, students get two slips of paper—one slip with a riddle question and the other slip with the answer to a different riddle question.

Question	Answer
What is in the middle of Paris?	"r"
What word is always spelled wrong?	"wrong"
What is the capital in England?	"E"
What is the longest word in the English language?	"smiles" (... because there is a "mile" between the first "s" and the second "s")
Can a word become shorter if you add a syllable to it?	Yes, "short" (... when it becomes the word shorter).
Which is the shortest month?	May (It has only three letters.)
The more there is, the less you see—what is it?	darkness
What is the difference between here and there?	"t"
What has teeth but can't eat?	a zipper (or a comb)
What has a face and two hands, and goes round?	a clock
What did the little hand on the clock say to the big hand on the clock?	"See you in an hour!"
What does everybody in the world do at the same time?	age (get older)
If five dogs are chasing a cat down the street, what time is it?	five after one

## APPENDIX 2: Engl-o-teka

This activity is loosely based on a Croatian TV game show that features a kind of role play. Two suggestions for incorporating role plays into the language classroom are given here.

### Role Play Option A

The purpose is for students to get practice speaking English through trying to determine which of three game show guests has the target role and which two are pretending. All three claim to be the real "X." Students can work in groups to draft questions and prepare information about how the person in the target role might respond to questions from the class. During the activity, each group has three minutes to ask as many questions as they can of Guests #1, #2, and #3. One option—lion trainer—is given below. Any profession, however, could work in this activity, and students in a group can choose their own profession. After asking all the questions and listening to the answers from the three "guests," the groups vote for the guest they think is the actual professional (lion trainer, in the example below). Points are given to each group that attracts incorrect guesses—but, as usual, the real value of the activity comes from having students ask and answer questions, exchange information, and communicate in a meaningful way.

Here are sample instructions. One student plays the "real" lion trainer, while the other two students pretend to be lion trainers.

(For one student): You are, for the purpose of this part of Engl-o-teka, to play the part of a lion trainer. You have been working at this job for five years. You only work with very calm lions and you have not been attacked, yet. Of course, you may make up anything else to try to convince the contestants that you are not the lion trainer.

(For the other two students in the group): You are to pretend to be a lion trainer. You can say you have been working at the job for five years, that lions are trained from birth to be at ease with humans, and that only a certain kind of African lion is used because they are tamer than other species. To tame a lion, one must be calm, stay collected, and repeat the steps of training often. The lions must be rewarded for correct behavior with large meals of raw flesh, preferably of an animal and not the trainer!

### Role Play Option B

Students get together in groups, preferably of three, and again they will play the parts of “guests.” Instead of choosing a profession, though, they choose an experience that one of the students has had, but the other two students haven’t. For example, suppose one student has gone swimming in a lake after dark, but the other two haven’t. For the purposes of this activity, all three students will tell their classmates that they *have* gone swimming in a lake after dark. Their classmates then ask questions, which the three “guests” answer, each trying to convince the class that he/she is the person who really has gone swimming in a lake after dark. Finally, the class votes on who is telling the truth and who is pretending.

Students can prepare in their groups by telling one another about unusual things they have done or experiences they have had. Together, they pick one of those experiences. Then, each student must prepare to answer questions from classmates. The student who really did swim in the lake after dark will be able to answer truthfully, whereas the other two students will have to imagine scenarios where they might have swum in a lake after dark; each student’s scenario should be different. The three students can work together to develop scenarios so that all three of them will be able to answer questions like When, Where, Who, Why, etc.

When all groups are ready, the groups take turns going to the front of the class. Each person in the group will make the same statement (“I have gone swimming in a lake after dark”) about the experience. After that, members of the class ask questions, the “swimmers” answer them as convincingly as possible, and then, after a time limit of perhaps three minutes, the class votes on who they believe is telling the truth.

## Classroom Activities

Kelli Odhuu

### The Incredible Shrinking Dialogue

**Level:** Upper Intermediate and above

**Time required:** 60 minutes, depending on class size

**Goals:** To encourage students to analyze a text to find the most important ideas; to give students practice in paraphrasing, speaking, and performing

**Materials:** short dialogues with 4 or 5 lines for speakers A and B or cartoon strips with 6–10 panels

**Background:** This activity is based on the concept of *improv comedy*, which is dialogue and action that actors create spontaneously to make an audience laugh. The students do not need to know this, but they do need to know that this activity depends on a template—a set of steps the students perform—and that through these steps, they can make the audience laugh.

#### Procedures:

1. Put students into pairs. As each pair performs the activity, a student from another pair can act as timekeeper.
2. Tell the students what they will do in each round of this activity so that they can prepare for the full activity before performing in front of the class:
  - Round 1:** Read the dialogue while acting it out with gestures.
  - Round 2:** Shorten the dialogue and act it out in half the time. Paraphrase well to keep the main ideas, and use gestures to enhance the audience's understanding.
  - Round 3:** Shorten the dialogue again and act it out in 5 seconds. Be sure to keep the main idea and use gestures.
  - Round 4:** Act out the dialogue in 1 second. You should use gestures, but you have time for each speaker to say only one word.
3. Hand out dialogues to each pair. Each pair must have a different dialogue. Student A will have several lines to speak, and Student B will have several lines to speak. The best dialogues to use include some action (gestures, facial expressions, and body movement) and some kind of conflict.

If you don't have dialogues, or if you want to give students practice writing creatively, have them work in pairs to write their own dialogues or create their own cartoon strips. Students can then exchange those dialogues. The

pair that receives the dialogue acts it out. You can promote the creation of new dialogues by asking students to use vocabulary they are currently studying. For example, if students are learning about holidays, have them write dialogues focused on those holidays. In this way, the activity provides vocabulary practice and review.

4. Each pair practices the dialogue together to prepare to present it in front of the class. Students should practice the dialogue enough times so that they feel comfortable reading it. Tell students to use action with their hands or body whenever possible and also to use facial expressions to show meaning. Students do not have to memorize the dialogue when they act it out and in fact should read the script exactly for Round 1.

Then the pairs should plan for Round 2. The students must shorten the dialogue so that they can read it and act it out in half the time. Depending on students' abilities, they should probably write out the shortened dialogue and practice it, making sure it takes exactly half the time. Next, the pair should plan for Round 3 by shortening the dialogue again, making sure they can perform it in 5 seconds. Finally, the pair should decide on the one word each student will say in Round 4.

5. Have the students perform their dialogues in front of the class. Before each pair performs, assign someone from another pair to act as timekeeper.

**Round 1:** It should take the students about 30 seconds to 1 minute to act out the dialogue. When the students finish, the timekeeper should note how long Round 1 has taken.

**Round 2:** The two students perform a shortened dialogue in half the time. If Round 1 took 1 minute, Round 2 should take 30 seconds; if Round 1 took 30 seconds, Round 2 should take 15 seconds. The students should shorten the dialogue but keep as much of the original meaning as possible. Because the pair planned out and practiced each round before performing, they should need only a few seconds at the end of Round 1 to prepare to perform Round 2. The timekeeper should yell out and stop the action when the time is up.

It is important that the pair keep the dialogue to the correct amount of time. It is not okay for students to do the dialogue in much less time or much more time than the round allows. Controlling the time in this way helps the class appreciate the humor of the activity.

**Round 3:** The students perform the shortened dialogue in 5 seconds. The students must keep the meaning of the original dialogue while also making sure not to go over 5 seconds. The timekeeper should make sure that the dialogue does not go over 5 seconds.

**Round 4:** The students perform the dialogue one final time, but this time in 1 second. There is usually enough time for Speaker A to say one word

and Speaker B to say one word. What words correctly capture the meaning of the whole dialogue? The students must decide. The timekeeper usually doesn't do anything for this step because the performers are in a hurry.

It's best to allow one pair of students to perform all the rounds before another pair begins so that the audience can follow the progression of the dialogue. The comedy comes in Rounds 2–4 as students refine the meaning of the original dialogue and perform it in less and less time.

One more note about the timing. Timing is very important in comedy and very important in these steps. If a pair of students cannot act out the dialogue in the required time, the humor in the activity may be lost. When the timekeeper calls "Time!" the students should be just finished with their dialogue. Therefore, the planning and practice at the beginning of class is an essential element of the activity.

### Example Dialogue: Raking Leaves

The following example dialogue shows how the activity will work in your classroom.

**Round 1:** Two students act out the dialogue with facial expressions and hand gestures. The timekeeper notes that it takes 50 seconds. (Suggested gestures are added, though students can create their own.)

**Parent:** Wake up! Today is Saturday, and we're going to rake the leaves!

**Child:** (*child is lying down*) Oh, no! (*gestures running hands through hair as if just waking up*) We do this every year! Why do we have so many trees in our yard? (*yawns*)

**Parent:** In the summer, you complain that we don't have enough trees to shade our yard, and in the fall you complain that we have too many! Do you want more trees or fewer trees? (*gestures with shrugging shoulders*)

**Child:** I want more trees in the summer and fewer trees in the fall.

**Parent:** I'll tell you what: help me rake the leaves this morning, and this afternoon you can invite your friends over to jump in our leaf pile.

**Child:** You've got a deal! Now I wish we had more trees to make a bigger leaf pile! (*jumps out of bed*)

**Round 2:** The two students act out the shortened dialogue in half the time: 25 seconds. They keep gestures that relate to the new dialogue. Because they planned out the entire activity before performing Round 1, they have this dialogue written out. The timekeeper yells "Stop!" after 25 seconds. If the pair has not completed the dialogue within 25 seconds, you can ask the pair to do it again until they complete the dialogue before the timekeeper yells "Stop!" Students should add gestures and movement to the following dialogue:

**Parent:** We're going to rake the leaves!

**Child:** Oh, no! Why do we have so many trees in our yard?



**Parent:** Do you want more trees or fewer trees?

**Child:** I want more trees and fewer trees.

**Parent:** Help me this morning, and this afternoon you and your friends can jump in our leaf pile.

**Child:** I wish we had more trees to make a bigger leaf pile!

**Round 3:** The two students now act out the dialogue in 5 seconds. They can read the dialogue, or they may have it memorized. The timekeeper yells “Stop!” after 5 seconds. Again, since the completion of the dialogue in only 5 seconds is very important, help the pair shorten their dialogue until they can do it in 5 seconds.

**Parent:** Rake the leaves!

**Child:** Oh, no!

**Parent:** Help me, and then jump in our leaf pile.

**Child:** More trees!

**Round 4:** The two students now act out the dialogue in 1 second. The timekeeper doesn't have to keep time as long as the two students know that they each get to say one word.

**Parent:** Rake!

**Child:** Jump!

Notice that in Round 4, the child says “Jump!” for the very first time. However, it is what the child is thinking in the earlier rounds when saying, “I wish we had more trees.” The humor comes when the audience hears the child put this thought into a new word and sees the accompanying action.

## Variations

1. If you find dialogues that are longer or have advanced students, you can change the time in the rounds and perhaps add another round. For example, if Round 1 takes 4 minutes to act out, then Round 2 will be 2 minutes, Round 3 will be 1 minute, Round 4 will be 20 seconds, and Round 5 will be 1 second.
2. Find or create dialogues or strips with three or four characters speaking, so that groups of more than two students will act them out. The rounds and the time remain the same; however, some characters won't speak in Round 4. (Or each character can say only one word.)
3. If you have students who are talented in improv comedy, have them go through the whole activity without practicing before Rounds 2–4. This approach creates more humor and spontaneity, and it is truly improv comedy because each speaker must listen to the other one in order to know how to respond.
4. You can repeat this activity throughout the year in order to promote fluency and paraphrasing skills; the students have new dialogues each time.