

One size fits all: 11 activities adaptable to nearly any level and topic



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By the title, we certainly don't mean that all classes and activities should be the same. Indeed, the opposite is true. Every class includes learners of different abilities and interests. We need to modify our teaching to reach those different groups of individuals.

Many activities are tied to certain functions or bits of grammar. It would be hard to imagine, for example, teaching students to give directions without using maps of some sort. Other activities are far more flexible. We can think of them as "activity frameworks." By changing the topic or grammar focus, they can be useful for classes working on nearly any aspect of English.

Communicative language teaching is based on the premise that students learn best when they are actually using English to communicate. Of course, as teachers we need to look

at how we are supporting the students in that communication. We find that most successful activities feature three specific types of support:

- **Linguistic support.** Where are the students going to get the grammar and vocabulary? Is it being specified or are we activating language that the learners already know?

- **Task support.** Activities need a clear goal. That's why "Discuss X" or "Talk about Y" are usually non-starters in language classes in Asia. A good rule of thumb is that an activity is only a task if you can tell when you've finished. The goal is what makes it the A-B-C game below remain interesting for 26 turns -- far longer than many activities can maintain learner involvement.

- **Affective support.** We can't assume that English is naturally interesting or that learners are

motivated on their own. Some may be, but those aren't the ones we need to worry about. As teachers, we can increase affective support in several ways:

- **Personalize the activity.** Have students talking about their lives and ideas.

- **Make it challenging.** Teachers sometimes say, "I can't do challenging activities because my students aren't motivated." The opposite is usually true. With unmotivated learners, we must challenge to get them involved.

- **Turn the activity into a game.** Of course, language learning games should be based on chance as much as skill. You don't want the best students winning all the time.

What follows are several activities that contain those elements of support. They are all activities that are flexible and can be used for a variety of purposes. Some are old standards. Other we hope are new for you.
Enjoy.

• A-B-C game

Quick description: Students work in pairs. They think of items that fit the given pattern. They must have one item for each letter of the alphabet, in order.

Preparation: On the board, write the sample pattern. For example, for the first conditional, write:

If you bring the ____, I'll bring the ____.

Procedure:

1. Explain the situation. For the first conditional, tell the students they are going on a picnic. They must bring one thing for each letter of the alphabet, A to Z, in order.

(You might want them to leave out the letter X since there are so few words that begin with it. After all, no one really brings a xylophone to a picnic.)

2. Divide the class into pairs. Partners stand and face each other.

3. Demonstrate the activity with one pair:

Student A: *If you bring the apples, I'll bring the bananas.*

(A slaps B's hands.)

Student B: *If you bring the bananas, I'll bring the cake.*

(B slaps A's hands.)

4. Once learners understand what to do, have them all begin at the same time. The first few pairs finished are the winners.

Variations: This can be used with many different pieces of grammar. For the *Going to* future, have them plan a trip around the world. They must go to a place that begins with each letter (*First, we're going to go to Alaska, then we're going to go to Bangkok, etc.*). At beginning levels, they can even do this with known vocabulary (I have an apple, you have a book).

Note: This is a drill. However, the challenge to get to the letter Z gives it a game-like feeling. Note that they have to pay attention to their partners in order to repeat the last item before they add their own idea. The standing and slapping hands isn't directly related to the activity. However, it does get learners physically involved with the activity and lets you see that they are doing the task.

• Circle drill

Quick description: Students work in groups. They build on each others' sentences. The first person says a

sentence, the second repeats and adds a sentence, and so on.

Preparation: On the board, write the sample pattern. For frequency adverbs:

I'm _____ and I always _____.
usually
sometimes
hardly ever
never

Procedure:

1. Explain the goal. Students will be talking about themselves and other people. They will try to remember as much information as possible.

2. Divide the class into groups of 12 (smaller groups are possible, but larger groups provide for more items and a larger challenge. Of course, students can always go around a second or third time.).

3. Demonstrate with a student. Point to the board and gesture for a student to say a sentence like the one on the board (*I'm Maya and I always go shopping on Sundays*). When she finishes, repeat her sentence, adding her name (*She's Maya and she always goes shopping on Sundays*). Then add a sentence of your own (*I'm Ms. Smith and I never eat fish.*) Then gesture to another student to repeat the two sentences that have been said so far.

4. Once students understand the game, have them work in groups.

5. They shouldn't take notes because it takes away from the game-like atmosphere of the activity. If someone gets "stuck," they can ask the group for help. Variations: This works with almost any piece of grammar (abilities, likes and dislikes, verb tenses) though using simple grammar makes it easier to remember the items. If the

students are trying to be accurate with a difficult piece of grammar and remember a lot of other things at the same time, their capacity in English may get stretched too far.

• Find someone who (FSW)

Quick description: Students work in a series of pairs to find out information about each other.

Preparation: On the board, write the sample pattern. You may want to use some sentences from the textbook, but you might also enjoy making up your own sentences based on your class. You'll need about 7-8 sentences. For example, for the present tense:

_____ likes to surf the internet.
 _____ wants to be a movie star.
 _____ is in the basketball club.

Procedure:

1. Explain that students are going to find out interesting things about each other. The class will work as a whole group. You can have the students copy the sentences, you can provide them a handout, or you can tell them to just take notes.

2. Demonstrate the activity with a student. Look at the first sentence and ask, "*Do you like to surf the internet?*" If the student says "*Yes,*" write the name on the blank on the board. Move on to another student and ask about the second sentence. If the first student says "*No,*" ask the next question until you get a "*Yes.*" Tell them they may write a person's name only once.

3. Once the students understand what to do, they work as a whole class, milling around, changing partners.

4. It's often a good idea for you to mill around too, to see what is happening and to pair with any students that need a partner.

Variations: You can make this into a speed contest, with the first person completing the worksheet the winner. This activity works with many verb tenses, including the past and present perfect.

• **DIY FSW (Do it yourself - Find someone who)**

Quick description: Students write information about themselves. The teacher collects the sentences and redistributes them. Students try to find someone who can say yes for each item.

Preparation: None. Optional: Make copies of about 4 "sentence starters" with the language form(s) you want to practice to make step two go faster.

Procedure:

1. Have learners fold a piece of paper into four squares. They tear the squares apart.

2. Dictate four "sentence starters." Students write what you say and complete the sentences about themselves. For example, if they are working on infinitives and gerunds (-ING forms), you could dictate the following:

I enjoy ____ing.

Someday, I hope to ____.

I dislike ____ing.

I want to ____.

3. Students give you all the squares. Mix them and give each student one (not their own). They stand and circulate. They ask questions to try to find someone who can answer "yes" for each. When they do, they write that person's name on the square. That represents one point. They get a new square from you and continue. The winners are the people who get the most points.

Notes: The person who says yes doesn't have to be the person who

originally wrote the item, just someone for whom it is true.

Variations: This can be used with nearly any tense or other piece of grammar that can be personalized. For language functions and topics, they can write sentences about themselves, their families (physical description: *My sister has shoulder-length hair*), their rooms (prepositions: *There's a radio next to my bed.*).

You might want students to ask a follow-up question each time they get a yes answer. (e.g., A: *Do you like skiing?* B: *Yes.* A: *How often do you go?*)

• **Match game.**

Quick description: Students take a 'quiz' based on the target structures or functions. Then they compare answers in a group.

Preparation: Make a list of 8-10 items, based on the target grammar, function or topic. For example, if learners are talking about likes and dislikes, list things such as *What food do you like? What is a food you dislike?*

Procedure:

1. Students work alone. Read the questions. Students write their own answers.

2. Students work in groups of three. They compare answers. Each time a partner wrote the same answer, those partners each get one point. If all three partners wrote the same answer, they each have two matches so they get two points.

3. There are two winners. The person in each group with the most points wins because they had the most universal answers. The people with the least points also win because they had the most unique answers

Variations: To work on various tenses, draw a series of stick figures on the board in various positions. Their actions should be unclear. To get the target forms, make the time clear (e.g., for the past continuous: These pictures are from last weekend. What were the people doing? *They were ___ing. He was ___ing. She was ___ing.*)

• Who wrote that?

Quick description: Students write true sentences about themselves. In groups of about six, they read out the sentences and try to guess who wrote each.

Preparation: None. Optional: Sentence starters can be printed in advance (see DIY FSW, above)

Procedure:

1. This activity begins like DIY FSW. Have students tear a piece of paper into four squares and write four true sentences about themselves, based on the target grammar, function or topic. You might want to dictate 'sentence starters' to help learners focus.
2. Students work in groups of five or six. They mix all their sentences together.
3. One student chooses a sentence and reads it out. That student guesses who wrote it. If s/he is correct, s/he gets one point. If s/he is wrong, any student can guess.
4. The person who says "yes" chooses the next square and continues. The people with the most points at the end of the given time are the winners.

Notes: You might want to use an eraser in the middle of the table as a "game show buzzer." Learners must touch the buzzer before they answer. The real purpose is to let

them know who really was first to answer.

Variations: Again, this can be used for nearly any grammar tense or topic that can be personalized.

(Present perfect: *I have been to..., I have never ..., I have eaten... I have seen...;* Past simple: *I went to ___ last year. I ___ last night, I ate ___ once. I saw ___.* ; Going to future: *I'm going to ___ during the next vacation./next summer/ this weekend/ tonight.*)

• Three things

Quick description: Students work in pairs. Based on the grammar point, they try to find three things that are true about both of them. Then they try to find three things that are true for their partner but not for themselves.

Preparation: On the board, write an example of the target sentence. For example, for the simple past, write: *Did you ___ last weekend?*

Procedure:

1. Students work in pairs. They try to find three things that are true about both of them. For example, if the target is to find things they both did last weekend, they ask questions like *Did you go to a movie last weekend? Did you study English..., etc.* After they find three things that are the same, they find three things their partner did that they didn't

2. Optional: As pairs finish, have them form groups of four. They tell their new partners what they found out.

Variations: Like the previous activities, this can be used for various tenses and topics/functions that can be personalized.

• About us.

Quick description: Learners work in pairs, seeing how many things based on the target grammar they can find that are true about both of them in a given time.

Preparation: On the board, write an example of the target sentence. For example, for the passive, write: *Have you been given (invited, introduced, etc.) _____?*

Procedure:

1. To give students ideas, elicit several questions from the class that fit the target pattern.
2. In pairs, students see how many things they can find that are true for both of them in five minutes.
3. Have students write their answers. After five minutes, they join another pair and compare answers. To do this as a game, they get one point for each item they wrote that the other pair didn't write.

Notes: This is similar to "Three things" but, instead of going for a specific number, they see how many items they can identify in a set time.

If you do have learners write their answers, you might want them to do so with magic markers on large sheets of paper. It makes comparing easier and takes on a game-like feeling.

Variations: Again, this works for most tenses. For example, for the present continuous, have them write things they are doing right now (*We are speaking English. We are breathing. We are sitting.*)

• Telephone

Quick description: This is based on an old party game in which people repeat what they have heard from another person. The fun comes in the distortion of the messages.

Preparation: On the board, write the sample pattern. For the past tense:

On my last vacation, I _____.

You might want to write a large ED on the board to remind students to use the past tense.

Procedure:

1. Explain that this is a memory test. Divide the class into pairs.
 2. Demonstrate with one student. Tell the student ten or twelve things you did on your last vacation. Ask the student what she did.
 3. Then join another pair and repeat what your partner has told you to a new partner (C). At the same time, ask the partner to repeat your information to her new partner. (D)
 3. Finally, ask D to tell you your information and note how it differed.
 4. Once students know what to do, let the pairs work together. Then signal for them to change partners when they are finished and work with a new pair.
 5. If you think your students can handle more than ten pieces of information, increase the number.
- Variations: This also works well with routines, but any piece of grammar can be turned into a memory game.

• Memory game

Quick description: After doing a task, students close their books and see how many items they can remember.

Preparation: None.

Procedure:

1. When students finish a task, have them work in pairs or groups of 3-4. They close their books and see how many items from

the task they can remember. These can be vocabulary items (e.g., family vocabulary, items of food or clothing, etc.) or example sentences (*He can sing very well. She can't play guitar.*).

Note: This can be done either as a cooperative task or a competition. For a cooperative task, the team gets a point for any item any member remembers. For competition, the first person to remember an item gets a point. This activity is a good way to review vocabulary because it requires students to 'mentally revisit' words they are learning.

Bonus activity (This did not appear in the original *Language Teaching Ideas* version of this article.)

• Chalkboard race

Quick description: In teams, students take turns running to the board and writing original sentences in the target structure.

Preparation: none

Procedure:

1. Divide the class into as many groups as can work at your chalkboard at the same time. Teams line up an equal distance from the chalkboard (2-3 meters or, in a typical school classroom, in a line even with the first row of desks).

2. Point out the target structure. For example, if they are working on comparative adjectives, they need the following forms:

___ is (adjective)+**er** than ___.

___ is **more** (adjective) than ___.

3. Give a piece of chalk to the first person on each team. Call out the category. The first person in each row runs to the chalkboard and writes a sentence comparing two items from that category (examples:

Animals: *A flamingo is more colorful than a duck.* Cities: *New York is bigger than San Francisco. Seoul is more exciting than Busan.*) When the first student has written a comparative, s/he runs back to his/her team and gives the chalk to the next learner who goes to the board and writes another sentence. This sentence must include a different adjective.

4. Allow 1-2 minutes for each category. They get one point for each correct sentence. Category ideas for comparatives:

animals, cities, places in this city, famous people, TV shows,

Notes: You might want to have students check other teams' sentences. If they find a mistake and can correct it, their team gets an extra point.

To make sure that even weaker teams keep trying and have a chance to win, build in an element of chance. Do this by:

- writing a 'secret' adjective on a piece of paper. Any team that happens to use it gets 10 bonus points.

- if one or two teams get far ahead of the others, have them stand about two meters farther from the board as a handicap.

- having all sentences in the last 2-3 rounds worth more than one point each.

Variations: Again, this activity works for most tenses. Other ways to play the game include preparing a set of cards for each team with target vocabulary. Each player chooses a card and must write a sentence in the target form that includes the word. You can also use this for review descriptions of people by saying a description (e.g., *She's got shoulder-length wavy hair, parted on the left and she wears*

glasses.). Players race to the board and try to be the first to draw a very simple picture of a face that includes the features mentioned.

We hope you find these ideas useful. We're always interested in your comments. Write to Marc Helgesen at march@mgu.ac.jp