

Information-gap activities

“Which are the best speaking activities?”

The best are those that:

- 1 are **relevant** to students' interests, stimulate them to want to talk and are at the right language level.
- 2 contain an **element of choice** as to how students can do them and what they say, to allow them to express their own personalities at least a little.
- 3 are **localised** and often made or adapted by the teacher who knows his/her students best. It's always a good idea to personalise and customise coursebook exercises where possible, using pictures, local names, faces and places to replace those in the book. Here are two examples.
 - Rather than just doing what's in the coursebook, e.g. to introduce giving opinions, do a heads-up FLASHCARD presentation, such as:
 - What do you think of ...?* (FLASHCARD of a local place)
 - What do you think of ...?* (FLASHCARD of a locally famous person)
 - What do you think of ...?* (FLASHCARD of a sportsperson students know)
 - Alternatively, for comparatives, two FLASHCARDS of a pop star and a sports hero, for example, for students to compare who's taller, fatter, thinner, stronger, more intelligent, etc. ◆ SEE CHAPTER 5 FOR MORE PRESENTATION IDEAS
- 4 force students to listen to each other. ◆ SEE PAGE 47
- 5 have a clear objective, e.g. a problem needing to be solved, so they know when they've finished and achieved what you asked.
- 6 contain an INFORMATION OF OPINION GAP.

“What's an information gap?”

Each student has or is given information that his/her partner doesn't have. Students have to interact in order to share their information, in other words to 'bridge the gap' between them. Good speaking exercises have either an INFORMATION GAP (I can't complete the exercise until I get the information which my partner has) or an OPINION GAP (I don't know what you think so I have to ask and listen to find out), e.g. two students have to plan a route somewhere but one student can see only a train timetable and the other a bus timetable. Each has to tell the other the information they have in order for them to decide how best to travel.

Language practice is much more meaningful when students are asking questions to which they don't already know the answers. Compare with the traditional alternative, where students were drilled or drilled themselves from information they both already knew or could see. If both students have the same timetable, there's little point in A asking B *What time does the train leave?* when A can see for him/herself!

T A S K

Think about your favourite speaking activity. Does it satisfy criteria 1 to 6 above?

1 Creating an information gap

There are some very good published INFORMATION-GAP activities. SEE FURTHER READING Here are some very simple ways for you to generate such activities.

Information gap on the board

Put words or pictures on the board, or BLU-TACK things on it, e.g. posters, FLASHCARDS, etc. One student looks at the information on the board, the other(s) simply looks away or sits with their backs to the board. SEE THE DESCRIBING GAME PAGE 66

Information gap from books/the teacher

In pairs or groups, one student has the information from:

- ... a whispered word or slip of paper from the teacher
- ... the coursebook (all students have their books closed, except one student who can see a picture, list of words, etc.)
- ... the coursebook interaction section (most modern coursebooks have A/B communication activities, which supply different information for students in pairs to complete together).

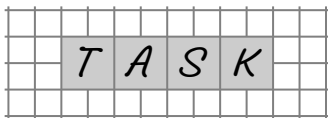
Information gap from real materials

- Look for a suitable text from a newspaper, magazine, brochure, etc. containing 'real' facts, e.g. cinema information, advertisements, articles, biographies.
- Make two copies and, using correction fluid, blank different words out in each one. Mark one copy A and the other B.
- Make copies for each pair (A and B). Students ask each other questions, e.g. *What time does the film start/finish? What's on at the New Theatre? When was Madonna born?*, etc. to complete their information.

This can also be done with dialogues, e.g.

A	B
<i>I went to the with John.</i>	<i>I went to the ice-rink with</i>
A asks <i>Where did she go?</i>	B asks <i>Who did she go with?</i>

Note: If your students are weak at formulating questions, As can work together in pairs beforehand to prepare the questions, as can Bs.



Cover the text below and look back through the activities in Chapter 10. How many of them contain an INFORMATION GAP? Label those that do. Then check your answer below.

Unless students already know the answers to the questions they're asking (e.g. *What's your name?* to somebody they know or *Do you like football?* to a known avid fan), the answer is that they all do.

2 Home-made information-gap activities

As with presentation techniques (SEE PAGE 28), pictures are invaluable. Here are three ways to exploit a simple, home-made picture.

Find the same picture

- Draw a simple scene ten times. SEE PHOTOCOPIABLE PAGE 8 Each picture has one small difference from all the others. This could be:
 - ... a different item or number of items
 - ... an item in a different position
 - ... a different shade (black or white) or pattern.
- Photocopy the sheet once for every ten students in your class, e.g. with a class of 40, make four copies, cut them up and give each student a picture, which they mustn't show to anybody else.
- Pre-teach any new words, putting them on the board if necessary. The advantage of drawing your own is choosing which words are practised.
- Students describe their picture to other students in the class and ask questions until they find another student who has exactly the same picture. They use language like *On the right there's a black cat. Have you got a black cat? How many birds are there? Is your door white?*, etc.

Spot the difference

Perhaps the best speaking activity of all, this is a reliable friend that works at any level. At my school in Spain, I regularly had to substitute for sick teachers without notice. I always kept a supply of three different spot-the-difference pictures to hand so I could just walk in and, according to the level, do the easy one, the intermediate one or the difficult one. This guaranteed me a good first 20 minutes and enough time to invent something else for the rest of the lesson!

- Give each student a picture from PHOTOCOPIABLE PAGE 8. They turn to the person next to them to find the number of differences between their pictures, using similar language to *Find the same picture* above. Then they can turn to another partner and do it again.

Many ready-made commercial versions of this are available and you can sometimes find examples in your local press and puzzle books too. The disadvantage of not drawing your own is that you have less control over the vocabulary. As this is such a good activity, there are two more spot the differences on PHOTOCOPIABLE PAGE 9.

Describe and draw

One student looks at a picture and describes it to his/her partner, who has to draw it, without seeing it. You can do this with PHOTOCOPIABLE PAGE 8 again. This involves language like *Draw a black cat in the right-hand corner at the bottom. There are three birds flying outside the window*, etc. Once the drawing is complete the students compare it with the original, which is usually fun. Then they swap roles.

Pictionary

Use the commercial game Pictionary to practise speaking in the class, or play a simplified version practising vocabulary and phrases of your choice.

- Choose about ten vocabulary items/phrases you want to practise, e.g. names of animals, present continuous phrases such as *He's swimming*. Write the items onto cards several times.

- Put the class into teams of about five students. Give each team a set of cards.
- In turn, members of each team pick the first card and have to draw what's on it. The other team members mustn't see it. They have to guess what their partner is drawing and say the exact words on the card, i.e. **not** *He swims*.
- When they guess the word(s) on the card, the next team member takes the next card and draws it, etc. The team to guess all the words first wins the game.

Find someone who ...

This is one of the most common and popular activities in English Language Teaching today. You can use this to practise a specific tense or to revise mixed structures, e.g. just before an exam. Although many published ones are available, the best are those that:

- you make yourself, containing exactly the language you wish to practise, including the names of locally famous, controversial/fun people and places.
- include a second column to make students ask FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS, to progress beyond interrogation into more natural conversation and FLUENCY.

Look at PHOTOCOPIABLE PAGE 10. Help students to fill the chart in with questions they want to ask the class, as in the sample below. Give and elicit suggestions for each line, then help them to translate and fill in their ideas.

Find someone who ...

	name	details
can swim 100 metres	Marco	He says it's easy!
can't make an omelette	Julia	She can't cook.
likes Johnny Depp	Oscar	good actor
doesn't like studying English	Alba	difficult
has got a tattoo	Pepa	on her arm
hasn't got a Disney video	.....	.....
would like to have a lot of children when they leave school	.....	.....
went to the cinema last weekend	.....	.....
didn't do the last homework	.....	.....
has been to the beach recently	.....	.....
hasn't been to McDonald's	.....	.....
is going to earn some money soon	.....	.....
isn't going to do anything this weekend	.....	.....
is the tallest person in their family	.....	.....
is going to cycle home	.....	.....
played basketball last week	.....	.....

(The idea of adding FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS came from Christina Latham-Koenig.)



Which activities in Chapter 10 are not suitable for home-made adaption and production similar to those above? (SEE PAGE 96 FOR THE ANSWER)