

This section presents three stand-alone language learning activities related to the theme of trains. Each activity is designed for students at the proficiency level indicated.

Train Lineups

Level: Low Intermediate and up

Time required: 15 minutes for preparation (more if students use the Internet); 10 minutes for each lineup

Goals: To get students to speak and listen to one another, cooperate to quickly achieve an objective, and move around with a purpose

Materials: a blackboard or other kind of board for writing target sentence structures

Preparation: In some countries, trains are prevalent and are used by many people; in other places, trains are not common. It is best to begin the activity by finding out whether your students have had experience riding trains.

Procedures:

1. If you don't already know whether your students have experience riding trains, begin by finding out. You might simply ask, "How many of you have ridden on a train?" You can follow up by asking students where they went, who went with them, what they remember about the train ride, and so on.

2. On the board, write the following template:

Departure date:

Destination:

Cost of ticket:

Number of people with you:

3. Ask students to plan a train trip they would like to take, and tell them to fill in their own templates with information based on the trip they plan.

If students are not sure of the information, such as the exact cost of the ticket, you can ask them to estimate it. Or, if you have access to the Internet, students can find the information.

Note: If all your students have ridden on trains, they can fill in information based on their experience rather than on a trip they plan. In that case, please see Variations for details on how to conduct the activity.

4. Tell students that they are going to participate in a lineup activity and that they will have to stand up, ask and answer questions, and line up in order, based on the information they have written down.

5. On the board, write the following questions that students can ask to elicit information from their classmates (possible answers are in parentheses):

Departure date: When are you going? / When are you planning to go? (I'm going on [date]. / I'm planning to go on [date].)

Destination: Where are you going? / Where are you planning to go? (I'm going to [place]. / I'm planning to go to [place].)

Cost: How much will your ticket cost? (My ticket will cost [amount].)

Number of people: How many people are going with you? ([Number] people are going with me.) [*Note:* If only one person is going with the student, the answer would be "One person is going with me."]

Go over the questions; make sure students understand what each question means and how to answer the questions.

6. Have students stand up. Tell them that they will form a line according to information they have written down, and that they must ask one another questions in order to find their place in the line. If you begin with the date of departure, the student with the earliest departure date will stand at the beginning of the line (show students where the line will begin), and other students will line up in order, with the last student being the one with the latest departure date. Order will be formed from the initial chaos.

Students should ask the appropriate question to other classmates, and as questions are answered, they stand in order. Often, small chains will form, and then the members of the chains merge as students continue asking and answering until one long line is formed.

This is an opportunity for students to mingle and have fun. However, they might be tempted to simply shout out their information before being asked a question. To avoid that situation, you might make one rule: *Students cannot give information unless someone asks them a question.* You can circulate to make sure everyone is following the rule (and you can feel free to find your place in line, too).

7. Once the line is formed, ask students when they are going on the trip—or have students ask one another, one at a time, so that the whole class can hear. All students should listen to the answers to make sure they are standing at the correct place in line.

8. Follow the same procedure to form new lines by having students ask each other questions about

the remaining items in the template; students will stand in order from shortest trip to longest trip, then least expensive to most expensive, and then the fewest number of people traveling together to the most people traveling together.

Variations

1. If all your students have traveled on trains, you can conduct the activity based on the most recent trip each student has taken. The lineup process remains the same, but students will be using the past tense in their questions and answers:

Departure date: When did you go? (I went on [date].)

Destination: Where did you go? / What was your destination? (I went to [place].)

Cost: How much did your ticket cost? / How much was your ticket? (My ticket cost [amount].)

Number of people: How many people went with you? ([Number] people went with me.) [Note: If only one person went with the student, the answer would be “One person went with me.”]

2. Lineups can be used for many topics, from birthdays to zoo animals. Depending on the topic, students will practice using simple or continuous present, past, and future tenses. It's always a good idea to ask the students for input, as they often have excellent lineup ideas. The last person in line could be a good candidate for giving an idea!

Train Dictadraw

Level: Intermediate

Time required: 45 minutes

Goals: To practice and produce vocabulary related to trains by describing and drawing

Materials: pictures or photocopies of trains (pictures could be the same or different, depending on availability); paper; pencils or pens; tape

Preparation: If pictures or photocopies are not available, ask pairs or groups of students to draw a train. These drawings should be kept secret from other students. Later the train drawings can be exchanged with another pair or group to carry out the dictadraw portion of the activity.

Procedures:

1. Teach the learners the target train vocabulary. This could include the following:

Types of trains

steam locomotive
diesel locomotive
electric locomotive
high-speed train
trolley
tram

Train cars

passenger car
dining car
freight car
flat car
oil tank car
caboose

Parts of locomotives or cars

window
wheel
smokestack

2. Check that the learners have a sound knowledge of the vocabulary by performing simple drills. You might show a picture of a train and ask students to describe it in pairs; you can also have students use one of the words in a simple sentence.

3. Divide the class into groups of four or five people—or pairs of students if you prefer.

4. Tell the groups that they must choose one person to be an artist. Some groups may have more than one student who wants to be an artist; some groups may have none. You can move people around accordingly, as not everyone is comfortable with drawing.

5. Ask each artist to stand or sit so that his or her back is facing the group (or partner) and so that everyone in the group can see the artist's back. When everyone is ready, give each artist a blank piece of paper to draw on.

6. Go to each group and, using tape, affix the picture, photocopy, or drawing of the train to each artist's back. Be careful to make sure that the artists do not see the picture. (You can have students help with this step as long as they understand that the artist should not see the picture that will be on his or her back.)

7. Each group must now describe the picture to the artist, making use of the train vocabulary. Group members should take turns providing information. Artists may ask for clarification as needed.

At first, it can be helpful for the artist to receive a general overall understanding of the picture rather than a lot of details all at once.

For example, the describers might begin with an overview: *This is a picture of a train with an electric locomotive, three passenger cars, and a caboose.*

The describers can then concentrate on details: *The locomotive has eight wheels—four are in the front, and four are in the back.*

The artist can also ask questions to get more detail and clarification:

Artist: *How many windows are in the passenger car?*

Describer: *There are eight windows in the passenger car.*

While the groups are speaking and drawing, you can circulate around the class to answer questions and monitor progress. The drawing portion should take about 15 to 20 minutes, depending on the complexity of the photos or drawings.

8. When artists have finished drawing, have the groups compare the artist's drawing with the original. They should notice details that were missed, added, or changed, and they should try to figure out how they could accurately describe those details. However, the artist should not make any changes to the drawing after seeing the original.

9. Post the original drawings or photos alongside the students' drawings on the wall or in another space visible to the entire class.

10. Ask each group to take a turn describing its train to the whole class. This could be done by the artist as his or her chance to use the language, or it could be done by another member or all members of the small group.

Another option is to have groups describe differences between the original photo or drawing and the artist's drawing that was based on their description.

You can take advantage of these comparisons as an opportunity to notice which details the students were able to describe and understand accurately and which details were difficult for them to communicate or comprehend. The missed or inac-

curate details could lead to teaching moments and give you an idea of points that need to be addressed in students' learning.

11. Provide positive feedback regarding language use and drawing skills!

Variations

1. You can add vocabulary to make the activity more challenging, to allow students to describe additional details (such as people on a train), or to include pictures of a train station. The following vocabulary might be helpful:

People involved with trains

engineer
conductor
passenger
freight hopper

Parts of the track or station

rail
tie
spike
platform

2. Descriptions of the trains can be written and returned to you for review.

3. The dictadraw activity can be done with other pictures or just about anything the class is studying. Other types of drawings could be personal appearance, clothing, or rooms in a house.

Who Gets to Ride?

Level: Intermediate and higher

Time required: 1 hour

Goals: To develop pair or group cooperation and critical thinking skills

Materials: One handout of the Passenger List (page 52) for each pair or group; if handouts are not available, you can write the information on the board or dictate it to the class.

Background: This is a highly adaptable pair- or group-decision activity in which students work together to find a solution to what could be a fairly complex problem: whom to allow onto an overcrowded train.

Procedures:

1. Divide the students into pairs or small groups; four or five people per group is a good number.

2. If you are using groups, ask each group member to assume a role within the group. Here are possible roles:

- Leader – maintains group unity by helping with decision making and by resolving possible disputes within the group
- Secretary – records the group's decisions and reasons
- Presenter – presents the group's findings to the whole class
- Monitor – keeps the group speaking English
- Enforcer – keeps the group on task

3. If some groups have more than five people, more than one person in each group can have the same role. You and your students can also create other roles.

4. Make sure each member has a clear understanding of what will be expected of him or her in the group. You might want to circulate around the class and ask students to tell you their roles and responsibilities. Make it clear that all students are expected to participate in the group discussion.

By now the level of anticipation regarding the activity will be high; this is a good thing.

5. Tell the students that they are conductors on a train, and they will need to solve a problem. The cashier has sold too many tickets, and now there is not enough room for everyone who wants to be on the train.

6. Give each group the Passenger List of ten passengers who are waiting to get onto the train, or write the list on the board. Tell students that ten people want to ride, but there is room for only five more passengers. Each person has a valid reason for wanting to ride, but the conductors must choose only the five people they think have the best reasons. People who do not board this train will have to wait three hours for the next one.

The Passenger List has a simple description of the reason each person has for wanting to ride the train. Go over these descriptions to make sure that everyone understands the vocabulary.

7. Give students about five minutes to think about the list individually and to choose the five people they think should be allowed to board the train.

8. Tell students to share their own decisions with other members of their groups. Tell the groups that they must come to an agreement about which people they will allow to board the train.

9. Tell students that at the end of 20 minutes, each Presenter should be ready with the following:

- A list of the five people chosen to ride on the train
- A short description *in the group's own words* of why the group has chosen each of these five people; it is very important to emphasize that the students must use their own language skills for the description. (If not done this way, the Presenters might simply read the descriptions from the Passenger List.)

Circulate around the class to check that the groups are on task. You can especially make sure

that the Monitors are doing their jobs. When you hear a language other than English being spoken, you can remind them it is their job to tell other group members to use only English.

After 15 minutes, give a 5-minute warning before asking the Presenters to give their decisions. If one group finishes before the others, check the work to see if it looks complete and ask that group to present first. The honor of being first often results in a rush of final reviewing and preparation. All group members should help the Presenter formulate reasons for the group's decision.

10. Depending on the number of pairs or groups in the class, you may want to limit the number of presentations. If you think you won't have time for all Presenters, have each group share its ideas with another group; then you can choose a few Presenters to share with the class. The most important aspect of this activity is not the choices the students have made, but the process and language they have used to come to these choices and to explain them.

Variation

There are versions of this activity that have other themes. For example, if your class is studying cities or parts of a town, you can try a similar activity called "Helping the People in [insert the name of your city or town]." Students are "given" a certain amount of money to fund projects around the city or town, such as building schools, cultural centers,

sporting venues, a train station, public housing, etc. Each project has a specific cost, and students must budget their money accordingly.

Extensions

1. This activity gives students an opportunity to engage in critical thinking, pair work or group work, and decision making. However, to give students additional language practice, you can extend the activity by, for example, having students role-play a conversation between two or more of the people who were not chosen to board the train or a conversation featuring one of the passengers trying to convince the conductor to allow him or her to board. Or each student can write an email (or text message) from one of the people who was not chosen to someone that person was supposed to meet—perhaps explaining the reason for the delay, suggesting new plans, and so on.

2. After your class is familiar with the concept, groups can work on writing their own group decision activity. One student group wrote an activity called "Fruit Salad," in which a child is given a certain amount of money to go to the market and buy fruit for the salad. The group created a list of 10 kinds of fruits, each with a specific cost.

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Passenger List

Louisa – Just started her new job last week and was late once after staying up all night with her young son, who was sick. If she is late again she will get a second warning, which could mean she will lose her job.

Will – A member of Congress/Parliament who is riding the train because he strongly supports public transportation and wants others to follow his example.

Gigi – Must get to the hair salon on time because she is going out with her friends to celebrate her birthday.

Tolik – Wants to ride the train because he is in love with Gigi. He is planning on declaring his love to her on the train today.

Rocco – Needs to be on time to catch a flight overseas to begin a year of studying abroad.

Anna – A group of business owners wants to build a parking garage on the grounds of the city park, and she needs to be on time for a meeting to keep the park from disappearing.

Julio – He dreams of being an actor; he has a tryout for the lead role in a new movie and cannot be late if he wants to get the role.

Lily – A 75-year-old woman going to babysit her grandchildren, whom she has not seen in more than a year.

Maya – A doctor who needs to get to the clinic on time to treat her patients.

Marina – On her way to the university; if she is more than ten minutes late, her teacher will lock the door and not let her in to take the final exam.