

Character Press Conference

by DONISTA SOLIJONOVA

LEVEL: Pre-Intermediate to Advanced

TIME REQUIRED: About 60 minutes

GOALS: To review and recall important character and plot details from a book or short story; to practice asking and answering questions about the reading text; to use appropriate language while playing an assigned role in a mock press conference based on characters from the reading text

MATERIALS: A level-appropriate book or short story that will be read outside of class time; pencils or pens; paper; notebooks in which students can write book logs; short review handout (see Step 6 under Preparation); blackboard or whiteboard; chalk or whiteboard markers; a picture of a press conference (if available) showing reporters and speaker(s)

PREPARATION:

Prepare for the press conference activity by doing the following:

1. Choose a short story or book from your curriculum or one that is interesting for your learners and ask them to read it individually at home. It should have at least three characters; ideally, the characters will have unique personalities, and it is best if students are surprised by what the characters do in the story so that they will have questions about why the characters behaved in that particular way. If you have several texts available, you might offer the class a choice.
2. Assign your students to write a book log related to what they are reading. The book log will be like a short diary, where learners make entries as they progress through the book or story. They can share their ideas, emotions, and attitudes about certain situations or characters. If students have difficulty choosing what to write about, you can provide them with questions related to the text they are reading. At lower levels, students might simply summarize, but depending on their ability, they should be encouraged to give their feelings, analyze, make predictions, etc. The book logs help students understand the story and characters, and they can use that understanding in the press conference.
3. Prepare small pieces of paper, one for each student in your class. On three of them, write the name of one of the three main characters in the story or book. On the rest, write the word *journalist*. A good size for the press conference is about 15 students: three characters and 12 journalists. If your class is larger than that, you might want to have more than one press conference so that all students have a reasonable chance to participate. It might also be possible to have more than three characters, depending on the story. (Note that students will not know their roles until they pick their pieces of paper randomly.)

Explain that at a press conference, journalists ask questions to people in order to get information about important news stories and current events.

4. Roll or fold all the papers and put them inside a box or bag for the learners to choose and determine their roles.
 5. Print out or write tabletop name cards for the three main characters in the reading text. Students should be able to read the name cards from all locations in the room.
 6. Prepare a short review of the story or book. This review should describe the personalities and possibly some of the actions of the main characters to remind students who the characters are and what they do. If your students are able, you can ask them to prepare this review. One way to do this is to divide the class into groups and ask each group to prepare a review of a different character. Students' work can then be read aloud or posted around the room for everyone to read before the press conference.
3. Guide your students through the short review of the story or book (see Step 6 under Preparation) and draw their attention to the three main characters. The aspects that students seem to enjoy discussing most are the characters' personalities and their behavior in certain situations during the story.
 4. Remind learners that three of them are going to role-play the main characters and the others are going to be journalists asking questions. Ask them to take a piece of paper from a box or bag and determine their roles for the press conference.

PROCEDURE:

1. Display a picture of a press conference and ask students to describe what they see. (You should be able to find pictures online.) Write *press conference* on the board. Ask students if they are familiar with press conferences and have them brainstorm descriptions or ideas they might have. If no picture is available, you can explain that at a press conference, journalists ask questions to people in order to get information about important news stories and current events. The journalists take turns asking questions, and they take notes while the questions are being answered. They use these notes to report on the press conference.
 2. Tell students that they are going to attend a mock (pretend) press conference with the main characters of the story or book they read. Tell students that some of them will be "journalists," and some will "act" as the main characters, who will answer journalists' questions about the characters' actions and other plot elements.
5. When the three students who will act as main characters are determined, ask them to leave the classroom, or, if the room is large, they can move to a corner. Tell these three students that the journalists will be thinking of questions to ask them, so the three "characters" should help one another remember details about their characters and actions.
 6. Meanwhile, the journalists gather and prepare questions about the characters they are most interested to find answers for. It is probably a good idea for the journalists to decide who will ask each question so that questions are not repeated and everyone has a chance to ask at least one question during the press conference.
- Tell journalists to ask questions requiring detailed answers (open-ended questions)

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rather than questions requiring only “Yes” or “No” answers. Open-ended questions might ask characters about their feelings at certain parts of the story and their reasons for doing things they did. Examples include the structures “How did you feel when ... ?” and “Why did you decide to ... ?”

Note that if the three main characters are in a corner of the classroom, they should not hear the questions that the journalists are preparing.

7. Steps 5 and 6 usually take about 15 minutes. During this time, you can prepare a table or three desks at the front of the room, where the characters will sit during the press conference. Place the name cards for the characters on the table or desks.
8. Invite the main characters back into the room (or come back from the corner of the room) to take their places at the desks or table at the front of the room. Ask the journalists to sit facing the three characters and prepare to ask questions.
9. Tell the students acting as characters that the journalists will begin asking them questions. They should do their best to answer the questions as completely as they can and not simply give “Yes” or “No” answers.
10. Journalists start posing questions, one at a time, and the main characters respond to them as if they were the real characters from the book or story. For example, they can use the first person “I” when talking about their character’s actions or behavior. While the characters answer, all journalists should listen and

take notes. Journalists should try not to ask a question that someone else has already asked.

11. During the press conference, quietly observe from the side or back of the room. Offer support as needed. Make notes about student participation and performance in the press conference. You may want to note down questions or language topics to discuss with the class after the activity. Make sure to use positive reinforcement of things that were expressed well.
12. Make sure all journalists have a chance to ask questions. If time allows, you can continue the activity until there are no more questions.

EXTENSIONS

1. Have students write a report on the information they have received from the main characters and publish it as a news article. If there is a school newspaper or class blog, students can write the articles in groups, with each group focused on a specific character. If there is no newspaper or blog, students can write articles individually to exchange or hand in.
2. Have students discuss what went well during the press conference, what responses they liked most, and what their reasons are for feeling that way. Students who acted as main characters can share how they felt during the press conference, which questions were the most challenging to answer, whether there were other questions they would have asked if they had been journalists, and so on. Journalists can also be given

the chance to suggest how they would have answered certain questions if they had been acting as the main characters.

3. It is possible to hold another press conference with other students acting as the same main characters, but students may grow tired or bored. A better idea is to hold another press conference based on a different book or story, and make sure that the students who acted as characters the first time become journalists in the next press conference.

VARIATIONS

1. To simplify the activity for lower levels, include prepared questions, or write question starters on the board, for students to ask when they are journalists. You can also pair up the journalists to come up with questions together. Other suggestions for classes that need language support are to take an active role in helping main characters prepare to answer questions, allow more time for preparation and practice, and choose roles for students based on your knowledge of their personalities (e.g., matching students with personalities that might be similar to the personalities of the characters in the story). You might also have two or three students represent each main character during the press conference; they can take turns answering journalists' questions, and they can support one another in case one student has difficulty answering a question.
2. For larger classes, if space allows, you can have students role-play in two big groups simultaneously.
3. During the press conference, have students who are acting as the main characters talk like the characters in the story and use the mannerisms of the character. In other words, they can

“become” that character during the time of the press conference.

4. If necessary or helpful, you might want to model a press conference near the start of the activity. You might also be able to show a short video clip of an actual press conference.
5. You may want to have the class vote and give awards to students who asked or answered questions especially well. However, it should be remembered that the main purposes are to practice using language in a new and interesting way and to help all learners understand more about a book or story they have read.
6. This activity can be done successfully with online/virtual learning. As a teacher, you will have to assign roles or find a way for students to select their roles by chance. Then, students can meet in breakout rooms to prepare for the press conference. You can hold the actual press conference with all students together in the main meeting room.
7. The idea of a press conference can be expanded according to students' interest in a topic. Instead of characters from a reading text, students can play the role of sports stars, other celebrities, and movie characters while other students ask questions as journalists.

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