

INFORMATION GAPS: MINGLE ACTIVITIES

While information gaps are typically designed for pairs and small groups, this week's mingle activity uses a whole-class interaction format. Mingles enable all students to have brief unscripted discussions with several classmates while they gather missing information needed to complete activity. During some mingle activities, students may take notes or use graphic organizers to record details as they interact with classmates.

The interaction flow during mingles can be spontaneous (students chat for a bit; when they are finished exchanging information, they walk around freely and find someone new to talk to) or managed (students switch partners on a timed basis or in a certain manner as directed by the teacher). This week's mingle information gap, "What am I? / Who am I? / Where am I?" uses a spontaneous interaction flow.

Mingles are excellent student-centered, communicative options for applying or reviewing recently taught language or content information. For additional information on how to conduct a variety of mingle information gap activities, read [Mingles in the Foreign Language Classroom](#) by Elena Borzova (*English Teaching Forum*, 2014).

LEVEL

Intermediate and above

LANGUAGE FOCUS

Speaking: asking and answering questions

Content: recalling details

Vocabulary: varies depending on thematic content; this activity uses an animal theme

GOALS

During this activity, students will:

- Orally ask about and share information related to the target item posted on their backs
- Review and practice vocabulary and/or content knowledge related to the target information

MATERIALS

- Teacher:
 - Whiteboard, chalkboard, or large pieces of paper posted on the wall
 - Markers or chalk
 - A timing device (clock, watch, or timer)

- Students:
 - Pencils or pens and paper
 - Cards with target information (“animals” in this example)
 - Safety pins or strong tape to attach the cards to students’ backs

PREPARATION

- Create a list of related target items that answer one of these questions: “What am I?” “Who am I?” or “Where am I?” The list can include recently taught vocabulary or content items such as animals, items in the classroom, occupations, characters from stories the class has read during the term, world cities, places in a school, etc. You’ll need one target item per student in the class. (Note: If you have a large class of 80 students, and your list contains only 20 target items, you can establish 4 groups that will simultaneously conduct separate mingles using the same content in different parts of the classroom.)
 - The procedures below use an animal theme, so the target list might include the following items, answering the question “What am I?”

Tiger	Octopus	Rhinoceros
Lion	Whale	Shark
Monkey	Eagle	Snake
Zebra	Fish	Mosquito
Dolphin	Alligator	Spider
- Create a stack of cards, each containing one item from the target list. Students will attach these cards to their backs during the mingle activity.
- Make sure you have enough safety pins or tape on hand so students can attach the cards to their backs.

PROCEDURES

1. Tell students they are going to participate in a mingle activity that will require them to ask each other questions and recall information from recently covered units. Explain that each student will receive a mystery animal. Tell students a classmate will attach a card with the name of the mystery animal to their back so they won’t be able to see the information. Explain that everyone must talk to their classmates to figure out which animal is attached to their back.
2. Elicit questions that students might need to ask to find out about their animal. Write the questions on the board. Questions might include:
 - What does my animal eat?
 - What is my animal’s habitat?
 - Is my animal a predator or prey?
 - Does my animal swim/fly/crawl/etc.?
 - What color is my animal?
 - Does my animal have legs? How many?
 - Is my animal a mammal/fish/bird/insect/reptile/etc.?
 - Does my animal live in this country? In which continent/country does this animal live?

3. Explain the mingle procedures:
 - Everyone will receive a card; they should not show the card to anyone. They will pin or tape this card to a neighbor's back, making sure the neighbor cannot see the card.
 - Everyone will stand up and bring along a pencil/pen and paper to make notes.
 - The mingle period will last 7 minutes (or other amount of time you think is appropriate for your students, depending on their language level).
 - During the mingle period, each student must talk to at least 5 different people, asking each person one question about their animal and answering a question about the other person's animal. Once information has been exchanged, students should find a new person to talk to. If someone doesn't know the answer to a question, students can ask that question to another person. Students should make notes about the responses they receive from their classmates.
 - At no time during the mingle period should a student ask, "Is my animal a/an [name of a specific animal]?" Students responding to questions should be careful not to include the animal's name in their responses.
 - When the mingle period is over, students will count off to form groups of 4-5.
 - In these groups, students must report the 5 (or more) pieces of information they collected and what they think their animal is. If they are incorrect, they must ask their group mates a few additional questions until they can guess correctly. Students should keep their notes; they will need them for the homework activity (See the Extension section below).
4. Ask student volunteers to pass out the cards and safety pins or tape. After students have attached their card to a neighbor's back, remind students to speak only English during the mingle and to stay focused on the task because they only have a limited amount of time to collect the information they need.
5. Start the timer and monitor student progress. As needed, remind students of the mingle procedures, make sure they stay on task, and provide support. The classroom will likely get very noisy. This is great because it means students are getting in a lot of talking time! Ask students to use inside voices or whisper if the volume gets to be overwhelming.
6. Once the mingle period is over, facilitate the formation of small groups so students can report the data they collected and check their guesses.
7. Explain the homework assignment. Remind students that they will use the notes and information they collected during the mingle to complete the assignment.

EXTENSION ACTIVITY

Direct students to write a short report (2-3 paragraphs) on their animal for homework. As part of the homework, they should verify the information provided by their classmates during the mingle before including it in the report. They can find information about their animals using their textbooks, information in the library, or internet sources.

INFORMATION GAP TIP OF THE WEEK – KEEPING STUDENTS ON TASK

Students have opportunities to talk freely during information gap activities. As such, some teachers worry that students will not stay on task. Teacher concerns may include students talking about off-topic things, using their L1 instead of English, and "cheating" by showing each other or orally giving away the missing information in the activity. Here are a few ways to address these concerns:

- Actively monitor student progress during information gaps and remind students of the activity guidelines, such as using English, as needed.
- Establish a clear purpose for the activity to encourage students to stay on task. This approach may include highlighting that the activity will help them review for an upcoming test or that students will need to use activity information in a follow-up assignment, such as the homework report mentioned above.
- Set timelines that challenge students, creating a sense of urgency for them to complete the activity in the given amount of time. You can always adjust activity timelines if students are actively working and need more time or if students finish quickly and seem to be getting off task.
- To prevent students sharing written or visual information gap prompts, have students sit back-to-back while completing the activity so it is difficult for them to slyly show each other the missing information.
- Make the activities fun, interesting, and relevant! As discussed in this month's Teacher's Corner "Background" section, information gap activities can be motivating since they vary the interaction patterns in a lesson, give students time to talk, and include a puzzle or problem that must be solved. As you've seen, information gaps can be designed to cover many types of content and can take many forms. Test out a few information gap activity styles to determine which ones your students respond to enthusiastically.