

TEACHER'S CORNER – JUNE 2015

SPEAKING: INFORMATION GAP ACTIVITIES

Creating interesting, meaningful speaking opportunities for EFL students can sometimes be a challenge for teachers. Including a variety of information gap activities in your curriculum can help you address this situation. In the June Teacher's Corner, we will examine the many forms information gaps can take, and we will explore several practical information gap variations that you can implement in classrooms of all levels.

What is an Information Gap?

Using a broad definition for the concept, information gap activities require students to communicate with each other to solve a problem or complete a task. In these activities, individual students do not have all of the information needed to achieve the activity's goal, which creates a "gap" that can only be overcome by speaking with other students to exchange information. The missing information required to complete the activity can be facts, opinions, or details related to textual, audio, or visual content.

Why Should I Use Information Gaps in my EFL Classroom?

Information gap activities offer several advantages; they can:

- **Increase student talking time:** students actively collaborate with classmates to achieve the activity's goal while the teacher facilitates the activity (preparation, set up and scaffolding, and during-activity support, as needed).
- **Increase student motivation:** students communicate for a purpose as they exchange and collect information needed to complete the task. Information gaps can involve group, pair, or whole-class interaction dynamics, which add variety to a lesson. Also, students get to feel like important "experts" because everyone has task-essential information.
- **Incorporate authentic communication situations and materials:** teachers can tailor information gap activities to meet students' real spoken English needs, such as asking for and following directions, asking for opinions, and problem solving with others. While teachers should provide level-appropriate scaffolding and language frameworks, communication during

information gaps is often unscripted, reflecting the communication format students will encounter in everyday situations. Also, information gap activities can be designed to incorporate authentic materials such as maps, brochures, and other real-world content.

- **Can be creatively designed to focus on meaning, form, and/or curriculum content:** once teachers become familiar with the formats information gap activities can take, they can build activities that meet many types of learning objectives. Teachers can create activities that require or encourage students to orally use recently taught vocabulary or grammatical forms. Teachers can also build information gaps around themes from non-language curriculum content areas, such as science or history.
- **Encourage critical thinking skills and teamwork:** during information gaps, students must often exercise problem-solving skills, determine what data is missing, categorize and analyze data that is collected, seek clarification from others, and collaborate with classmates to successfully achieve the activity's objectives.

This month we will examine several types information gaps, including:

- **Picture dictations**
- **Activities that use graphic organizers to record and analyze information**
- **Activities that use visual prompts and oral clues**
- **Mingle activities**

We will also suggest tips related to planning and conducting these activities.

You can find additional details about information gaps and activity examples in these *English Teaching Forum* articles and resources:

- [Try This: Listening and Logic](#) (2015)
- [Mingles in the Foreign Language Classroom](#) (2014)
- [Tools for Activating Materials and Tasks in the English Language Classroom](#) (2009)
- [Information Gaps in Communicative Classrooms](#) (2001)

Be sure to reflect on the potential advantages and challenges associated with information gaps as you explore this month's Teacher's Corner activities and the related resources. How might you adapt or adopt the practical ideas you see to meet your students' needs?