

Possible Activities

FOR THE TEACHER: SOME POSSIBLE CLASS ACTIVITIES

No one knows your class and your students better than you do. As the class instructor, you will of course rely on your professional evaluation of your students' needs when deciding how to use these materials. The following suggestions are intended only as ideas that may prompt your own creativity in using these interviews.

A FEW WORDS

The *A Few Words* section of the materials is not called *Vocabulary* because students might think that the label *Vocabulary* means that these are important words to learn. Often they are not. They are simply words and expressions that might not be in your dictionary. Your students may want to add the informal and slang expressions to their own vocabularies, but other things, such as the explanations of names and activities in American culture, may not be important to them. You may find that you need to give these words to students before they listen to some of the recordings, but students' listening skills will improve more quickly if they do not read the entire written interview before or while listening to the recordings for the first time.

LISTENING

In the past, language teachers often believed that listening is a one-directional activity. They assumed that learners develop listening skills by becoming familiar with the sounds and words of a language and then build up their understanding by putting the words together. This approach is often called "bottom-up" listening, and it is important.

Now we know, however, that listening skills also involve "top-down" processing and are often interactive. Top-down processing means that listeners use their understanding of the topic and their ability to logically guess what a speaker is likely to say next in order to follow and understand speech. In top-down listening, we encourage students to gather meaning even when they can't understand every word or detail.

We also recognize that much of our listening is interactive. While it is true that we listen to such things as lectures, televised news reports, and films without speaking, much of our language use is in conversation. We listen and then respond by speaking.

The interviews here can be used to encourage the development of these multiple listening skills.

Listening to authentic speech

These interviews were not recorded live: the young people are reading written transcripts of interviews. However, the interviews are natural English because they are the real words of real kids and were read aloud by real kids using their natural accents and sense of inflection. In many cases, the voice belongs to the young person who was originally interviewed. Remind your students that these recordings may not seem as simple and easy as the English in some of their textbooks because it is real English and, therefore, very good listening practice. People speak English with many accents, and these interviews will help our students learn to adjust to new ones when they hear them.

Top-down listening

Students can listen for the overall structure of an interview as it is played straight through once or twice. The teacher gives a general question to focus student attention on the main topics. Sample questions:

What topics are discussed in the interview?

What do you learn about the interests and personality of this young person?

After listening to this interview, what is something that you would like to ask this young person?

The first and last questions are the same in each interview, but what other questions are asked? Together as a class or working in pairs or small groups, students can create a list of the questions that they heard and then listen again to check their list for accuracy.

Bottom-up listening

Students can listen for answers to specific questions about the interview. Sample questions:

From the interview with Andrew: What is a tomahawk? What kind of a dog does Andrew own? How does Andrew travel to school?

From the interview with Jasmine: What is Jasmine's favorite subject? Which subject is her least favorite? Why does she like living in Oakland?

Interactive listening

The discussion questions are, of course, an opportunity to practice speaking skills, but students can be reminded that listening to their partner or small group in a discussion is an important part of developing listening skills too. Sample activities:

Assign one student in each group to serve as secretary and write notes on their small group's discussion. Assign another student to report to the whole class the major points raised in the discussion. Rotate assignments throughout the course.

For the interview with Amy: Amy gave a bit of advice. What advice would you like to give Amy?

For the interview with Landry: Survey students at your school and prepare a report on the results of your survey. What do students think are the most important signs that a young person is becoming an adult?

For a classroom with limited resources

If your classroom does not have electricity or a way to play sound recordings, you can still practice listening. You might have two students prepare one of the interviews and then read it (as often as needed) to the class. You could also recruit another English speaker to read the interview with you to your students.

READING

Like listening, reading is both a top-down and a bottom-up activity. We find the meaning of a text both by putting together our understanding of words and syntax (bottom-up) and by using our background knowledge of the subject and our ability to follow the organization of the text (top-down). Much reading theory suggests that our students will read best if they develop or activate a schema before reading, ask questions as they read, and connect the text to their lives after reading.

Activate schema

Because these interviews follow a consistent pattern, students can easily predict how an interview will be organized. The photo shows whether the interview is with a girl or a boy. The first and last questions are always the same. The body of the interview includes follow-up questions about the activities mentioned in the answer to the first interview question (What have you been doing this week?). Encourage students to use this organizational pattern to predict what they are likely to read. For example, you could stop after reading or hearing the answer to the first question and predict what topics will be discussed later in the interview.

Ask questions and read actively

Encourage students to guess the meaning of new phrases and words. Encourage them to predict what the answer to an interview question will be. Encourage students to form an idea about the personality of the young person as they read an interview.

Connect the text to oneself and one's world

Ask: How is the young person similar to you or someone you know? What about this young person's life is similar to yours? What is different? Do you think you would enjoy getting to know this person? What question would you like to ask him or her? What advice would you like to give?

For a classroom with limited resources

If you are unable to obtain copies of the interviews for all of your students, several of the interviews are short enough to be copied onto a chalkboard or onto a large sheet of paper and saved for repeated use.

SPEAKING

In order to become English speakers, students need opportunities to communicate their own ideas in English, to choose the ideas they want to express, and to choose the words that they want to use to express these ideas. When doing this, students will not speak "perfect" English, but the mistakes they make are a necessary part of learning a language. No one has ever learned to use a language without making mistakes. Often these mistakes are simply a sign that human beings are intelligent

and creative and must experiment with words before they can become fluent in expressing their ideas. In addition, students need opportunities for different kinds of speaking. We use language a little differently when we speak formally before a group and when we speak informally in conversations.

Speaking informally

The discussion questions at the end of each interview are intended as prompts for conversation. Because the questions after each interview are different, students will have opportunities to speak about many different topics and use a wide range of vocabulary. If your class is comfortable doing small group work, these questions should work well. If your students do not have experience with small group work, especially if your class is very large, you may want to begin with pair work so that students do not need to leave their seats. You can increase the likelihood that they will discuss the question instead of gossiping in their first language if you randomly call on some pairs to report what they discussed.

If you prefer to call on individual students to answer questions, consider using the *Think, Pair, Share* technique that was invented by Frank Lyman. This technique was developed to increase the amount of thinking that students do in class, and it also works very well for language teachers in increasing the amount of speaking practice that students get. In step one, *Think*, the teacher asks a question and waits for a few moments while students think about their answer. The students are not allowed to raise their hands or in any other way ask to be called on. In step two, *Pair*, students turn to one other person, state their answer to the question, and listen to their partner's answer. In step three, *Share*, the teacher has students share their answer to the question with the larger group. This may be by calling on different students in a traditional way to state their answer to the class, by having students write on the chalkboard or in their copy books, or by having students do something different such as draw a picture, make a chart, or do a role play. Language learners especially benefit from this technique because it allows all students to practice speaking without taking large amounts of class time, and it allows students to rehearse their answer before stating it before the whole class.

Speaking formally

Interviews are a fairly formal form of language use. Students may be interviewed when applying for a job or for university admission, and they will see political and business leaders as well as celebrities interviewed on television. You could help students practice this use of language in several ways. For example, students could, perhaps in pairs, write interview questions and then interview classmates on different topics. If the interviews are done in front of the whole class, students will get very authentic practice with speaking in a formal situation.

Students could prepare and videotape interviews, editing them carefully before presenting them to the class. While this is still formal speech, it may be less stressful for students than a live interview in front of classmates would be.

WRITING

As we have all experienced, one of the most difficult things about writing is having something to say. Our students usually produce better writing if we provide them with an opportunity for reading and discussion before they begin to write.

The discussion questions after each interview include at least one question that could be used as a writing prompt for a paragraph. If students have read and/or listened to the interview and have talked with their classmates about the discussion questions, it will be easier for them to produce a good paragraph. During a class discussion, you may want to write on the chalkboard words and phrases that arise and could be useful to students as they write.

It is also helpful if at least some student writing can be “published” in some way. Students, of course, tend to see the teacher as the most important audience for their writing, but if they have a larger audience too, writing tends to improve. One simple way to publish student work is to read it aloud to the class, being careful to correct any errors so that the student is not embarrassed and the class can concentrate on meaning rather than form. Posting writing on classroom walls or bulletin boards is another way to create a larger audience and give recognition to writers. If you decide to publish work, it is important that the writing of all students, not just the best students, is treated with respect.

If you have access to a photocopier, students could prepare a booklet of interviews on the ordinary life of ordinary kids in their own country to share with visitors from other countries and cultures, giving them experience with more formal and cooperative writing.

DEVELOPING MULTIPLE SKILLS WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

A dictogloss, first created by Ruth Wajnryb, is a very useful activity for practicing multiple skills while using very limited resources. In a dictogloss, the teacher selects a short reading passage (a three- to five-sentence answer to one of the interview questions would work quite well) and reads it to the class twice, at normal speaking speed. (Playing the recording could work very well too.) During the first reading, students simply listen. During the second reading, they take notes, but because the reading is at normal speaking speed, they cannot write down everything they hear. Students then talk together in pairs or very small groups, use their notes, and try to write the passage down so that it is complete and has the same meaning as the original, using their knowledge of grammar, vocabulary, and top-down organizational patterns to help them. After they have completed their work, students have an opportunity to share their reconstruction with the class and to compare their version with the original.

A dictogloss requires very little equipment. For the teacher, it is helpful but not absolutely necessary to have a chalkboard or large piece of paper for showing students the original reading after they have created their reconstructions. For students, all that is needed is something to write on and something to write with. Nonetheless, in completing a dictogloss, students must listen, write, speak, read, and use their knowledge of both English syntax and English vocabulary to finish the task.