

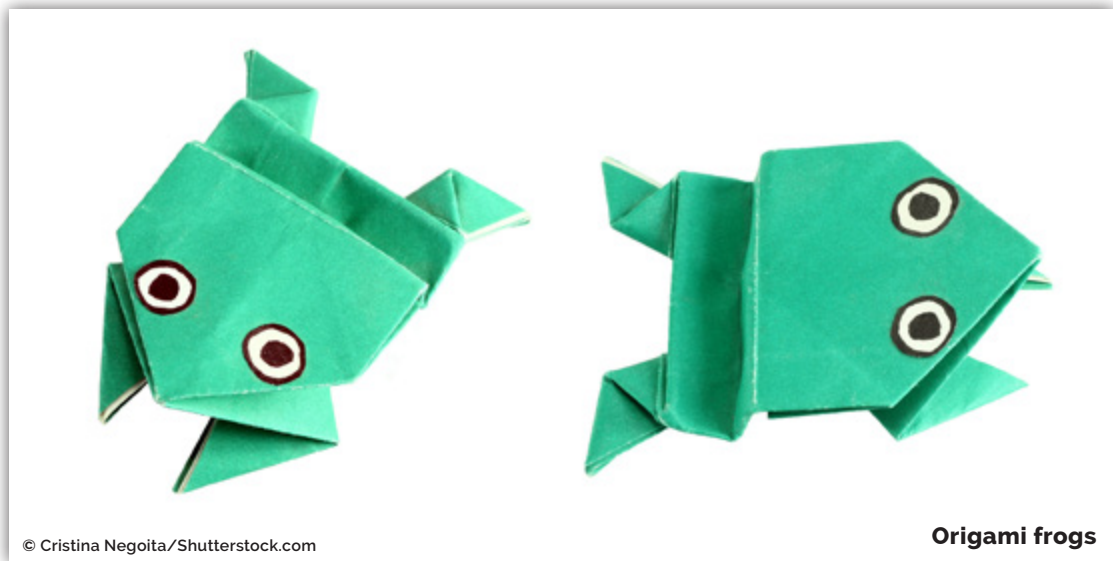
Running for Your Words!

by LAURA LODER BÜCHEL

In Swiss schools, English language textbooks for eight- to thirteen-year-old children contain many arts-and-crafts and science-experiment lessons with a focus on following simple instructions. An example of one is making an origami frog (*First Choice—Animals* activity book). The language is most

commonly accompanied by a picture for each step, as in these examples:

- Fold a square piece of paper in half. [with a picture]
- Finally, make your frog hop. [with a picture]



The recommendation in the teacher's notes is to simply pre-teach the vocabulary, read the text out loud, and then let the learners do the activity (making the object or carrying out the described steps). Unfortunately, in the lessons I've observed, learners tend to stick to their mother tongue or work independently in carrying out the task, as there is no real reason to communicate. There is also no need to understand the written text because the steps are accompanied by pictures and are presented in order.

To make these fun activities more conducive to communication, I have folded paper frogs and worked with recipes and www.wikihow.com successfully over the years in a slightly different way than mentioned in our textbook's notes for teachers. The following example activity is for beginners, after perhaps a year of English (two to three lessons a week), but it can be adapted for different levels.

PREPARATION

1. Copy the instructions onto strips of paper, with each line on a separate strip of paper, like this:

- *Fold a square piece of paper in half.*
- *Fold it in half again.*

A scanner mouse can save you time, but writing the text by hand or typing

it in also works. If you leave in the step numbers on the strips of paper, it simplifies the task later, which might be useful for younger learners. For older learners, I would take off the numbers.

- 2.** Hide the strips around the room (on backs of chairs, up high but accessible).
- 3.** Prepare a gap fill for the learners with the same language as the instructions you are working from. I suggest preparing two gap fills, one with fewer gaps for the less-confident learners and another with more gaps or more difficult gapped words for the stronger learners. Here is an example of one sentence from each:

- *Learner A: _____ a square _____ of paper in half.*
- *Learner B: _____ a _____ piece of paper in _____.*

In the gap fill, the steps can be in the right order or out of order, with numbers or without numbers. Make these decisions based on how much support your students need.

- 4.** Have new vocabulary words on the board (here *fold*, *edge*, *corners*, and other non-cognates).

LESSON

1. Pre-teach the vocabulary on the board. Make sure learners see and say the words. With more advanced students, I erase the words after the introduction.
2. Form pairs and hand out an appropriate gap fill to each learner (with the stronger learners getting the version with more gaps).
3. Model the following instructions:
 - *Work in pairs.*
 - *One person gets up, walks around, and finds a sentence. Memorize it! Say it three times to yourself. Move your lips, but don't talk.*
 - *Walk back to your partner. Say the sentence out loud to your partner. Both of you find the sentence in the gap fill. Then write the missing words in the gaps.*
 - *Take turns. Now your partner gets up and finds a different sentence and does the same thing.*
4. Learners repeat Step 3 until the gaps are complete and both partners have the completed text. Then, they have to figure out what order the steps should be in to make a paper frog. This requires language such as “I think this comes first,” which you might want to write on the board. For beginners, this may be too difficult, so leave the numbers on the cut-up strips of paper with a gap for the number (so that students practice saying the numbers), or leave the text in the right order.
5. In pairs, learners can read the instructions out loud together to internalize the language. They can also swap papers with another pair to peer-correct spelling. With beginners, I often do a choral drill with the steps and then let learners read them again in pairs.

6. Learners can now follow the instructions—in this case, they will fold the paper frogs. As they are folding their frogs, I tell them to chant the steps out loud as they work. Sometimes I say, “Chant it 20 times; then you can talk to your neighbor,” and this often leads them to try speaking exclusively in English for the entire lesson.
7. After they have done the exercise, they can open their books. This example lends itself to a discussion about the use of the imperative.

Over the years, I have done this sort of running dictation gap fill for any pages where there is perhaps too much support, when I feel the learners need to internalize the language more, or as an assessment of the language I think they should know. I find it has helped my learners to remember language better because they have to get up and say the English over and over again to themselves before they say it to someone else, so it increases their contact time with the target language. Depending on how long the text is, or what is analyzed afterwards, this technique can take anywhere from 20 minutes to an entire class period.

Furthermore, this running dictation activity works just as well for any basic gap fill activity you are working on. For example, if the learners are given a cloze text with the lyrics of a song, and the text is cut up and posted around the room, the learners can listen and put the lyrics in order. Often, hiding the strips of paper adds an element of fun. Enjoy!

Laura Loder Büchel, PhD, is a teacher trainer at the Zürich University of Teacher Education.

Beat the Clock: Building Oral Language Skills in English Language Classrooms

by ALEXIS CULLERTON AND INÉS TORRES DE MUÑOZ



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The lack of oral language in the classroom, combined with our students' lack of confidence speaking with native English speakers, encouraged us to develop a simple technique to increase speaking in the classroom. This original technique, "Beat the Clock," encourages students to speak in English and increase their oral proficiency at the same time.

Beat the Clock is a simple technique. The only material needed is a timer. The technique can be used with English language learners at every age and ability level, and teachers decide the length of time for the activity. We have

successfully used this technique with both large (up to 15 students) and small (five students) groups. When deciding upon a large- or small-group application of this technique, consider the following: (1) the desired number of talking turns per student, (2) the comfort level of students, (3) the students' knowledge of the topic, and (4) student personalities.

The technique was developed to address low levels of oral English by challenging our students to orally summarize the lesson on their own. The first minute of student talk was a little awkward, and the flow of

conversation was somewhat choppy, but students were able to talk among themselves in English for five minutes. As a class, we named the technique “Beat the Clock,” and we now use it often.

BEAT THE CLOCK— AN ORAL LANGUAGE CHALLENGE

The procedure for carrying out the technique is as follows:

1. Lead a prompt, which may review or expand upon the main themes in the lesson.
2. Set a timer to a desired amount of time (start with fewer minutes and increase).
3. Review the rules.
4. Start the timer when students begin speaking, stopping it early only if they break the rules.
5. Record the number of minutes that students were able to speak. Increase time expectation each time you use the technique. For example, if you set the expectation at two minutes the first time, and students meet that goal, set the timer for three minutes the next time.

When you are ready to use the technique, you can begin by giving students a prompt relevant to the content they have been studying, or you might ask them, “What are the main takeaways from today’s lesson?” After they have suggested a few ideas, you can continue: “I will set the timer to two minutes. Everyone must participate in the conversation. I will not interrupt you unless you break the rules. Remember, you must continue the discussion for two minutes.”

Optional: If students “beat the clock” and are able to speak for the allocated amount of time, they may receive a reward. If the students are *not* able to speak for the entire time or break the rules, they do not receive a reward and may have to start over.

BEAT THE CLOCK RULES

1. All students must participate equally (the teacher keeps track of participation by marking a point on the board or on a piece of paper every time a student speaks).
2. The teacher is not allowed to correct students.
3. The teacher is allowed to interrupt only if the rules have been broken.
4. Students must stay on topic.
5. Conversation can start with a student asking questions, but the aim of the activity is for students to engage in a natural group discussion about a topic.

HELPFUL HINTS TO SHARE WITH STUDENTS

- Instead of answering questions with *yes* or *no*, explain your answer.
- Try to build on the idea discussed by the person before you so the conversation progresses naturally.
- Keep track of who is participating and engage people who are not participating equally. Discuss areas of the topic that you want to know more about, that you don’t understand, or that you think are interesting.
- Use personal stories and examples if they are on topic.
- Don’t be afraid to make mistakes.
- Enjoy yourself!

USING THE TECHNIQUE: IT TAKES TIME

This technique is extremely beneficial over time, but be aware that the first time you use it in the classroom can prove challenging. The

technique takes students out of their comfort zones. At first, conversation might not have a natural flow, and students might forget vocabulary words or get nervous because of the pressure of the clock.

BENEFITS OF THE TECHNIQUE

In the months since we started using this technique with our students, we have noticed many changes in the classroom. We have observed our students gaining confidence and participating in more natural and authentic conversations. This technique has encouraged some of our most shy students to express themselves and, in turn, helped them acclimate to their environment. Moreover, students are excited when they reach another minute and keep track of the Beat the Clock minutes with enthusiasm. We have even observed students taking notes during class on ideas they might want to include in their conversation. We have begun using Beat the Clock every Friday so that students expect it and look forward to it.

When participating in the Beat the Clock technique, students can speak openly and do

not have to worry about being corrected, which has come as an added bonus. This, in and of itself, is a welcome opportunity in any language classroom and helps build confidence for oral language, without fear of embarrassment.

Additionally, this technique has served as an excellent informal assessment of oral language and a means of checking for understanding. It has helped develop relationships in the classroom and increased oral language and speaking skills. As time progresses, we find ourselves evolving with the technique and creating a more authentic learning environment to support oral language skills.

Alexis Cullerton, PhD, was a 2014–2015 English Language Fellow in Ecuador with the State Department. She is a longtime educator and literacy researcher of diverse populations. www.alexiscullerton.com

Inés Torres de Muñoz holds an MA in Evaluation and TEFL and is the founder and Academic Director of the Centro Ecuatoriano Norteamericano: Global Quality English in Loja, Ecuador. www.bnclloja.org