

Talking about Words: A Vocabulary Description Game

LEVEL: Beginner to Advanced

TIME REQUIRED: About 30 minutes

GOALS: To practice circumlocution skills by describing and guessing vocabulary words; to review vocabulary

MATERIALS: Blank notecards or paper; envelopes or folders; scissors; chalkboard and chalk or whiteboard and markers; a clock or other time-keeping device; a printer or photocopier (optional)



OVERVIEW: Circumlocution—using known vocabulary to describe a forgotten or unknown word—can help English language learners avoid communication breakdowns when speaking. For example, a speaker who can’t remember the word *toothbrush* might say, “It’s the thing you use to clean your teeth” to

explain the missing word and keep the conversation going. Students of all proficiency levels can benefit from instruction and practice related to circumlocution strategies. In this activity, students use these strategies to play a game that involves describing and making guesses about vocabulary items. Students practice circumlocution in a fun, low-stress setting; the game can provide fast-paced vocabulary review, too. (Note: You do not need to teach the term *circumlocution* to your students during this activity.)

PREPARATION:

1. Review the description strategies and sentence starters in Figure 1. Students will use some of these strategies and sentence starters to describe vocabulary words to their classmates during the game.
2. Choose one or more of the description strategies and sentence starters from Figure 1 to use during the activity.
 - With advanced students, you might present all of the information in Figure 1, but with beginners, you might focus on one or two description strategies and sentence-starter sets.
 - Be sure to consider which description strategies will be most useful for describing familiar words or recently learned vocabulary. For example, if you just finished a unit that included

Description Strategies and Sentence-Starter Sets

This list is a starting point for introducing description strategies; other circumlocution expressions are possible. Encourage students to contribute their own strategies and expressions.

Strategy: Use adjectives to describe the target word.

It's _____.

Example: It's big/small/short/tall/good/bad/new/old/round/flat/etc.

Strategy: Describe a category that the target word belongs to.

It's a _____.

Example: It's a sour, yellow fruit. *Answer:* lemon

Example: It's a big, gray animal. *Answer:* elephant

It's a kind/type of _____ that _____.

Example: It's a kind of book that lists similar words. *Answer:* thesaurus

Example: It's a type of wild dog that is big and gray. *Answer:* wolf

Strategy: Give an opposite of the target word.

It's the opposite of _____.

Example: It's the opposite of *new*. *Answer:* old

Example: It's the opposite of *strong*. *Answer:* weak

Strategy: Describe what the target word is similar to.

It's like a _____. / It's similar to a _____.

(noun or noun phrase) (noun or noun phrase)

Example: It's like a big lizard. *Possible answers:* crocodile, alligator

Example: It's similar to a book. *Possible answers:* magazine, newspaper, notebook

Strategy: For a place or location, describe activities that happen there, reasons a person goes there, or common items you can see there.

It's where you _____.

It's the place where you _____.

It's where you go to _____.

Example: It's where you go when you are sick. *Possible answers:* hospital, clinic, pharmacy

Example: It's the place where you exercise on machines. *Possible answers:* gym, fitness center

Example: It's where you go to get your hair cut. *Possible answers:* hair salon, hairdresser, barber shop

Strategy: Describe what the target word "does" or what the thing is used for. (Describe functions.)

It's the thing you use to _____. / It's the thing you use for _____-ing.

It's used to _____/for _____-ing.

It's the thing you _____.

You use it to _____.

Example: It's the thing you use to cut/for cutting paper. *Answer:* scissors

Example: It's the thing you use to wash/for washing clothes. *Answer:* washing machine
Example: It's the thing you use to call/for calling someone. *Possible answers:* phone, cell phone,
mobile phone

Example: It's the thing you carry your books in. *Possible answers:* bag, backpack, book bag
Example: You use it to write on the blackboard. *Answer:* chalk

Strategy: Use comparatives to describe the target word.

It's like a _____, but it's _____.

It looks like a _____, but it's _____.

It's similar to a _____, but it's _____.

Example: It's like a bicycle, but it's much faster. *Possible answers:* moped, motorcycle

Example: It looks like a horse, but it's black and white. *Answer:* zebra

Example: It looks like a snake, but it's much smaller. *Answer:* worm

Figure 1. Description strategies and sentence-starter sets

vocabulary for places in a city, you might choose the strategy and sentence starters related to describing locations.

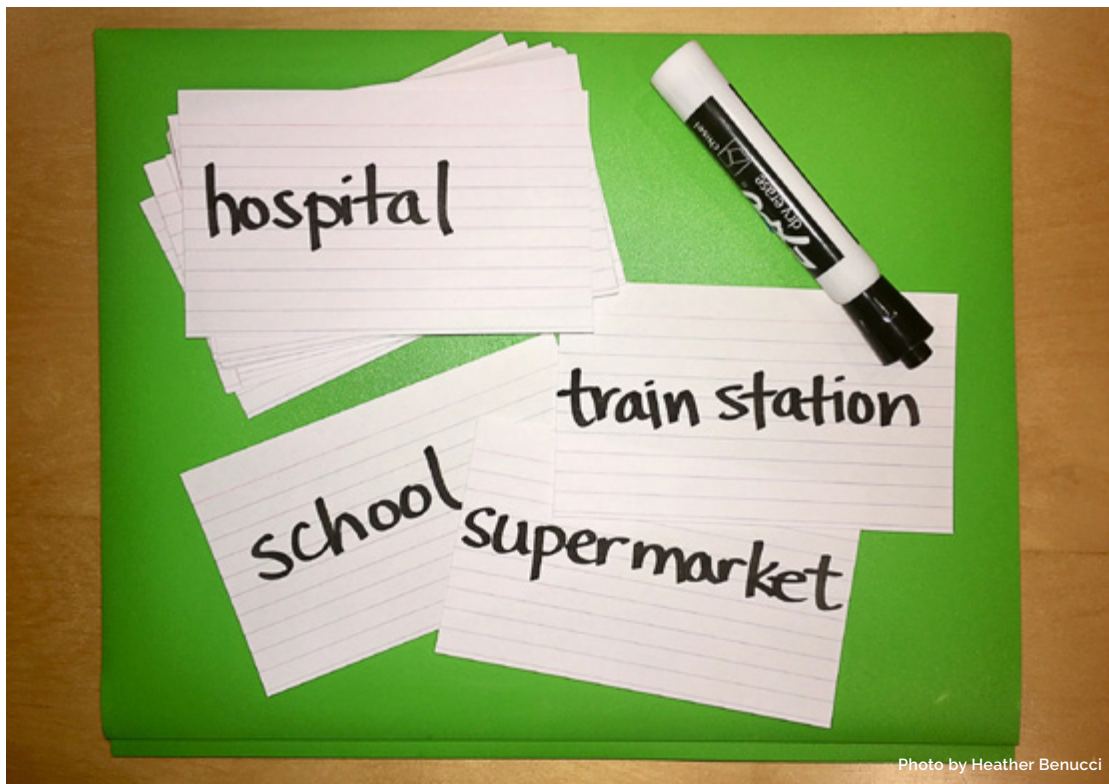
- Decide how you will share the selected strategies and sentence starters with students. You can write or project the information on the board, you can make posters listing the information and hang them around the room, or you can prepare and print a handout.
- 3.** Make a list of at least 30 target-vocabulary items that can be described by using the strategies and sentence starters you selected in Step 2. For instance, if you chose the strategy related to describing locations, your vocabulary list might include *hospital, school, library, supermarket, park, train station*, etc. Target-vocabulary items might include words that students should already know; the items might also include recently learned vocabulary that students are still practicing. The number of vocabulary items you prepare will depend on how many description strategies you will present, your students' proficiency level, and how long you want the game to last. Preparing extra items will provide additional

materials to extend the game for faster groups in the class.

- 4.** Create sets of game cards. To make one set, print each item from the vocabulary list you prepared in Step 3 on a separate notecard or small piece of paper. Make one set of cards for each group of four to six students in your class. Handwrite the words on the cards, or prepare the cards with a computer and printer or photocopier, and then cut them up. Put each set of cards into a separate envelope or folder. Preparing these card sets might take time, but once you have made them, you can reuse them in future classes. (Note: If preparing the vocabulary-card sets would be difficult based on your class size or available resources, see the Variations section for game options that do not require cards.)

PROCEDURE:

- 1.** Begin the activity by performing a brief role play with students to make them aware of circumlocution description strategies and their function in successful communication. This role play will also show students the process of describing and guessing words that will be used during the game. You can



Sample game cards

pretend to forget a word, then describe it to encourage students to guess it so that the conversation can continue; let student volunteers participate naturally in the dialogue. Feel free to adapt the sample role play in Figure 2 to reflect common foods where you live.

If appropriate for your students' level, after the role play is complete, draw attention to the process of describing unknown or forgotten words by asking questions like these:

- “How do you express a word in your first language(s) when you can't remember it during a conversation?”
- “When you speak English, do you try to describe words you can't think of? What else do you say or do when you can't remember an English word?”

Explain that learning different ways to describe forgotten or unknown words in English can help prevent communication

breakdowns and gaps. Tell students they are going to examine word-description strategies and then practice them during a game.

2. Direct students' attention to the strategies and starter sentences on the board or on the posters around the room (or have volunteers distribute handouts if you prepared them). Review the strategies and sentence starters: have students read the starter expressions and examples, and then elicit a few additional original examples for each description type. For example, if you are reviewing the *It's a ___* sentence starter, students might share examples such as “It's a spicy, red vegetable” or “It's a big, tough animal.”
3. Demonstrate the process of describing and guessing vocabulary items. Give descriptions using the sentence starters and ask students to guess the target words. For vocabulary related to places, you might say:

- “It’s where you go when you are sick.” (*hospital*)
 - “It’s where you buy food.” (*supermarket*)
 - “It’s the place where you borrow books.” (*library*)
5. When the class understands what it is like to develop descriptions and guess target words, form groups of four to six students.
 6. Tell the class that they are going to play a guessing game that uses the description strategies and sentence starters they reviewed. Select a group to assist you as you model how to play the game:

In this game, you want students to guess the exact target word. When they make a guess that is similar, but not exact, let students know they are on the right track by modeling prompting words and phrases like these: *Close. Almost. That’s almost right. It’s similar to (a) _____, but _____ [give further description]*. For instance, if you say, “It’s where you go when you are sick” to describe *hospital*, and a student guesses *clinic*, you might respond, “It’s similar to a clinic, but it’s bigger.” Write the prompting words and phrases you model on the board for students to use during the game.

4. Write a few vocabulary words—words that are *not* on the game cards you prepared—on the board and ask students to use the sentence starters to develop descriptions on their own. Students can compose their descriptions silently in their heads or write them down. When most of the class has finished, ask students to turn to a partner and practice giving their descriptions, with their partners guessing the target words.

- Hold up an envelope containing a set of vocabulary cards and explain that each group will have an envelope containing vocabulary items that students already know or are currently studying.
- Take one card out of the envelope. Demonstrate that only you can see the card.
- Tell your model group that you are going to describe the word on the card and that they should guess it. Give descriptions of your word using the provided strategies and sentence starters. For example, if the word is *pharmacy*, you might say, “It’s the place where you get medicine when you are sick.”
- Tell students to begin guessing. If two students call out the correct answer at about the same time, decide who answered first. (Note: If you are concerned about noise, ask students

Teacher: *Guess what? I had some delicious pie for dessert last night. It was a, um, what’s the word ... what kind of pie was it? It’s a fruit.*

Student: *Was it apple?*

Teacher: *No, not apple. It’s yellow.*

Student: *Banana?*

Teacher: *No, it wasn’t banana, either. It’s sour. A sour, yellow fruit.*

Student: *Lemon?*

Teacher: *Yes, yes, that’s right! A delicious lemon pie. What kind of pie do you like?...*

Figure 2. Sample role play

to raise their hands when they think they have the right answer. The “describer” can call on students in the order that they raised their hands.)

When a student in the group says the right answer, give that student the card and explain that this student now has one point. Tell students to keep any cards they collect while playing so they can count up their points at the end of the game.

- Pass the vocabulary envelope to the student on your left. Explain that this student will pull a card, describe the next word, and award the card (and one point) to the correct “guesser” in the group. Tell students that they will continue to describe one word, award a point, and pass the envelope to the student on their left until time is up. (For most classes, game play should last around 15 minutes.)
7. Ask a volunteer to pass out an envelope to one person in each group. Explain that the person holding the envelope in each group will be the first to describe a vocabulary item; the other students will guess.
 8. While the envelopes are being distributed, remind students to use the description strategies, sentence starters, and prompting phrases and to refer to the examples on the board (or on posters or handouts) for help when needed. Also, ask students to use their “quiet voices” while playing to keep the noise at a manageable level.
 9. Answer any final questions and tell students how long they will play. Start the timer and tell students to begin. During play, walk around the room to give assistance where needed.
 10. When time is up, tell students to stop playing. Ask them to count their cards to determine the number of points they earned. The student with the most cards in each group is the winner. If you want,

you can ask the winners to stand and be recognized with a round of applause from the class.

11. To close the activity, you might want to ask students to reflect on the description strategies they practiced during the game. You could ask if any strategies or sentence starters were particularly helpful. Encourage students to share how they might use the description strategies in communication inside or outside the classroom and to share any other ways they can keep conversations going when they forget a word.

VARIATIONS

If you have a large class or would prefer not to prepare vocabulary-card sets, try these two approaches to conducting board-based “describe and guess” circumlocution games.

1. Back-to-the-board: description in pairs

- a. After Step 4 in the Procedure section, put students in pairs, telling them to sit (or stand) face-to-face so that one student is looking at the board and the other is unable to see it.
- b. Write a word from the target-vocabulary list on the board.
- c. Ask students facing the board to describe the word to their partner. The student whose back is to the board guesses the word.
- d. After most of the class is done guessing—or after a set amount of time, such as 20 seconds—erase the first vocabulary item and write another for the students facing the board to describe.
- e. Repeat this process for several rounds. Then have the student partners trade places so that

the guessing student becomes the describer, and the describer becomes the guesser. Keeping track of points for correctly guessed words is optional.

6. Back-to-the-board: description in team semicircles

- a. After Step 4 in the Procedure section, form teams of six to eight students. Ask each team to position one chair or desk facing away from the board. Tell teams to face the board and form a semicircle around the chair.
- b. Tell the person on the left end of each semicircle to sit in the chair, facing away from the board.
- c. Write a vocabulary word on the board.
- d. Explain that the person standing on the far left of each semicircle should describe the word to the team member in the chair by using a strategy and sentence starter. If the person in the chair guesses incorrectly or can't form a guess, the next team members in the semicircle (moving from left to right) each offer one description until the person in the chair guesses correctly.
- e. Explain that when the person in the chair guesses the target word correctly, all team members should raise their hands. Check the team's answer and award a point on the board to the first team that answers correctly. Tell the other teams to stop guessing, and share the correct answer with the class.

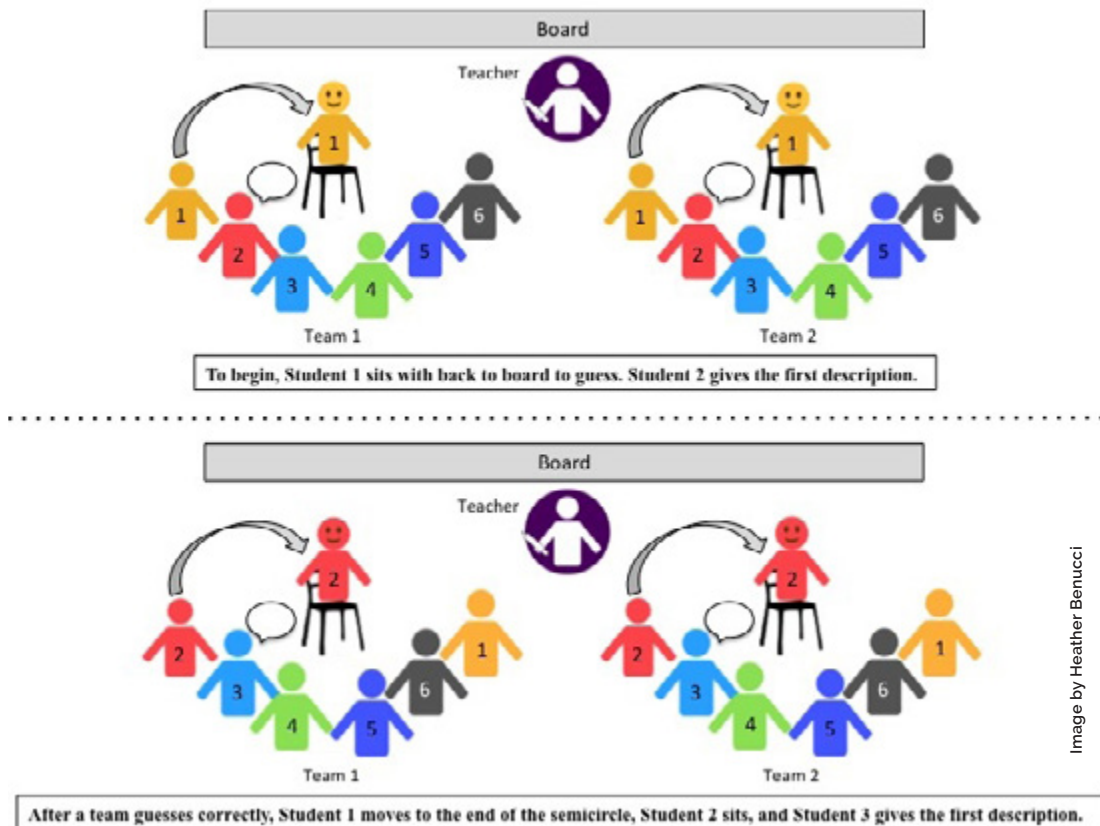


Figure 3. Student rotation in Variation 2 (back-to-the-board: description in team semicircles)



Photo by Jimalee Sowell

Players guess a word in the Talking about Words game.

- f. Tell students in the chairs to move to the right end of their team's semicircle; the person at the far left of each semicircle now sits in the chair, and the process is repeated with a new word. (See Figure 3 for a diagram showing this rotation.) Continue playing in this way for the desired amount of time.

EXTENSION

To include a writing focus, and for additional vocabulary review, you can ask students to use the strategies and sentence starters from the game to develop written descriptions for a list of words you supply. As an alternative, you can ask students to help you develop a list of recently studied words that they want more practice with.

- a. For each word, ask students to write a blank and then supply a description. For example: _____: *It's the thing you use to keep food cold.* Tell students to write the descriptions in a random order; that is, they should not write

their descriptions in the exact order of the target-word list. Students can develop their lists in class individually, in pairs, or in groups, or you can assign the development of a list as individual homework.

- b. When students have finished (or during the next class if the lists are created as homework), ask them to trade description lists with another student, pair, or group and to try to fill in the blanks on the list they receive.
- c. Ask students to return the papers, with blanks filled in, to the original owners, who can check the answers and provide feedback.

This activity was written by **Jimalee Sowell**, a PhD student in Composition and Applied Linguistics at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. A former English Language Fellow, she has worked as a teacher and teacher-trainer in a number of contexts. Her research interests include teaching writing and teacher training.