

## **Hello, I must be going!**

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**Level:** Can be adapted to suit lower-intermediate to advanced

**Time:** About 15-20 minutes for the initial preparation for the activity; about 15 minutes for the actual activity; about 10-15 minutes for follow-up. Note: This activity is designed to be done on a regular basis as there are many variations.

**Resources:** Whiteboard, markers, and timer

### **Goal**

For students to become more fluent in using and understanding basic greetings and leave-takings in brief “small talk” encounters.

### **Description of Activity**

This speaking activity, whose title is taken from Phil Collins' album title (1982) *Hello, I Must Be Going!*, involves introducing and reviewing the ways that people in English speaking countries greet each other, make small talk, and then signal that they would like to end the conversation and depart. I have used it successfully with ESL and EFL adults. The activity involves students (about 10, but could also work with more) standing in two circles, one inside the other. The number of participants in the outside circle must face a person on the inside circle; therefore an equal number of participants is needed in each circle, i.e. 5 on the inside and 5 on the outside. (With an odd number of students, the teacher can opt to participate, or have a certain “empty space” that acts as one person’s partner for one of the rounds. During this round the “odd person out” would be an official eavesdropper.)

The teacher helps set a scene and provide a social role for the students and, with the help of the students, provides the target vocabulary. The teacher has a timer and sets it for two minutes. When she says “go”, blows a whistle, taps the whiteboard, or

whatever signal has been predetermined, the students begin talking with the partner they are facing. They must greet, demonstrate self-disclosure, and turn taking while staying on a general theme of conversation in a total of two minutes (a time that has also been predetermined and shared with the students). When the timer beeps at the end of two minutes the students in the center circle remain stationary. The students on the outer circle have to gracefully use a verbal phrase which signifies that they have to leave now. The participants use parting phrases and each “outer-circle” student moves to his/her left (clockwise) to go through the same procedure with the next “inner-circle” student. The teacher resets the two-minute timer as soon as students have moved to their new partners. Each beep signals the students to repeat the procedure. This can go on until each “outer-circle” student has talked with each “inner-circle” student which may take up to 10-15 minutes for a group of 10 students. The classroom gets noisy and full of energy, and students who are otherwise reserved “come out of their shell”. Students feel that they can really communicate fluently with this activity and it improves confidence. The teacher keeps a distance from the maddening circle only offering assistance when a student turns and shows evidence of a total breakdown in communication, otherwise she/he listens to make sure people are engaging in verbal interaction.

### **Procedure**

1. After some initial discussion about what a greeting is, ask the students to take 1 minute to write down all the ways they can think of that English speakers greet people that they have met before and the corresponding answers. Ask them to think about what they learned in school, what they have heard on TV, and what they have heard people say in social situations.

2. Draw a line down the middle of the whiteboard. On one side write Greetings, on the other write Responses. Write the letter F for formal near the top of the board and I for informal near the bottom of the board (on the Greetings side).
3. Have students call out the phrases they have come up with . . . and ask them where you should write the phrase on the board.

For example they may come up with:

- How are you? Fine
- Hello! Hi!
- What's new? Not much

4. Correct the phrases on the board appropriately while encouraging further input. Add other phrases the class didn't think of such as the following with corresponding answers: (this will depend on the level of students and command of active vocabulary).

- How have you been?
- How are you doing?
- How's it going?

Point out that a "greeting" often involves a salutation, e.g. "Hi!" plus a question "How's it going?"

5. Discussing possible responses may take some time as there are many variations. For example "How have you been?" may be followed by "Not bad", "Great", "Same old same old", "Good".

6. Point out that a good general rule to remember is that:

When the question begins with "How", such as "How are you?",  
"Fine" is a good answer.

When the question begins with "What", such as "What's new?",

"Not much" is a good answer.

7. Have students choose one or two Greetings that they would like to learn (point out that the less informal ones are more universal). Ask them to circle them in their notes and also choose a couple of appropriate responses to greetings they may hear.
8. Go around the room greeting each student in a different way patiently waiting for them to look at the board, if necessary, for an appropriate answer.
9. Now ask them to imagine that they greeted someone successfully, responded appropriately, got into a nice conversation, and then looked down at their watch and remembered they had to be somewhere 5 minutes ago! . . . What would they say to get out of the conversation? Ask them to chat with a partner for 1 minute about possible answers.
10. Ask the students for ideas. If they can come up with some appropriate answers, put them on the board. Add the phrase, “Oh, I’m so sorry, but I really have to go . . . Nice talking to you.” Explain that the person leaving uses this phrase. Then the person staying can gracefully let them go and add “Nice talking to you too.” (Other variations can be added by repeating the activity another day, i.e. Nice to see you, nice seeing you, etc.) Have students practice saying this phrase out loud as a group.
11. Now the teacher explains that the students must stand up and make two “conversation circles” one inside the other and follow the procedure outlined in the Description section.
12. The teacher presents a topic/theme, possibly one that the students have been working on in their recent lessons, e.g. talking about the weather. Also tell the students what role they will be taking. Are they running into a high-ranking diplomat at the airport? or a friend? Each pair will have two minutes to greet each other appropriately, respond to each other, chat about the theme (making sure each person has a chance to speak), and close the conversation. Emphasize that this is often how native speakers interact, and in a fast-paced world people often do not have time for conversations of more than 2 minutes.

13. Explain that when the “beep” sounds, the conversation will be closed by each student on the outer circle looking at his/her watch and saying, “Oh . . . I’m so sorry, but I really have to go. It was nice talking to you.” The other student will reply with the practiced response. Then each outer-circle student will move one place to the right. Begin the same conversation with a new partner and end the conversation after the beep.
14. Continue at the teacher’s discretion. Follow-up may include asking individuals to share with the class something that they heard that was particularly interesting in the rounds and to identify the corresponding partner.
15. For closure, the teacher calls on one or more pairs to recreate their 2-minute conversation (one pair at a time) in front of the whole class. The teacher can take notes on a transparency and with one column lists a few examples of “good language used” and the other column listing “things that were not quite right.” Once projected, the feedback can be given to the entire class at the end of all the mini-dialogues.

### **Rationale**

- Time constraints are imposed as in real life which is culturally appropriate
- Repetition of common phrases is built into the activity which will help students “overlearn” them so that they can be recalled instantaneously when needed
- Allows students to practice different social situations (formal and informal)
- Covering the topic/theme with more than one partner allows student to become increasingly able to engage in “small talk” topics fluently
- Gives strategies of self-disclosure, listening, and turn taking, as each student has to comment on the topic/theme in a short period of time
- Allows familiarity with “saving-face” strategies in managing quick conversations in which not everything is understood

## Alternatives and Caveats

- This activity can be done with formal language as well if scenario is set up with students aware of how well they are supposed to know the people in the opposing circle.
- Can be done in rows instead of circles. Two rows of an even number of chairs are set up facing each other. One row will stay stationary while the other participants will move one chair to the right for each round.
- Can be designed to take into account British, Australian, etc. differences in pragmatics and/or language by presenting the appropriate target vocabulary.
- The teacher can vary the time and extend or condense the two-minute time frame depending on the topic and purpose of the activity. The number of rounds can also be reduced so that a student may speak for 5 minutes with each of only 3 students.
- For more advanced levels, at the beginning of each round, the teacher can call out a different "small talk" topic.
- Target vocabulary can vary; one day "greetings" and "leave-takings" can be the focus (*Hello, how have you been?*), another day safe "small-talk" topics (*How's the family? Can you believe this weather?*), and yet another day "conversation extenders" (*Really? Are you serious? That's too bad. Tell me more*), other ways of ending a conversation (*Well, I guess I'd better get going*).
- Target phrases can also be presented phonetically: *Howzit goin? Whatssup? Howya been? Sorry, I really gotta go*. Have the outer circle "play the native speakers" using relaxed pronunciation to familiarize the inner circle with what they may hear from native speakers.

- Have students incorporate conversational cues such as nodding, saying *uh-huh* or *yeah*., to show that they are listening. (See also contributions by Berry and Gallow, this volume.)
- Set the scene to represent the first time students are meeting each other. Go over phrases such as: *Hello, my name's Major Jones; Sorry, didn't catch your name; Nice meeting you; I knew I'd seen you somewhere; Hope to see you around.*

## References

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