

Part I: Common TESOL Activities

The most common TESOL activities in the modern classroom are quite different from those of a generation ago. As the communicative approach has grown in both research and pedagogical approach, teachers have continued to discover ways to make the classroom a place of excitement and learning.

The following activities were chosen not only because they are common to the field, but because they elicit the kinds of language production that communicative teachers are looking for. These activities tend to cross over the range of student possibilities, meaning that activities can be adapted for all students, from beginning to advanced, and from children to adults. This does not mean that every activity is necessarily an appropriate activity in the context that you find yourself. However, by reading through these activities, you are encouraged to explore how you might use and modify at least some of these activities so that you are more successful in your English classroom.

Top Ten TESOL Activities

1. Information Gap

Information gap is a term used to describe a variety of language activities with one common feature. In essence, an information gap activity uses as its premise the idea that one person or group of people has information that others do not have. Thus, the point of an information gap activity is to have people interact with each other in an attempt to find all the “missing” information. For example, imagine that one student has a map with all of the rivers labeled, but all the mountains are unlabeled. Another student has a map with all of the mountains labeled, but not the rivers. A teacher could invite students to share information with each other in pairs with only one simple rule: students with the river map are not allowed to look at the mountain map, and students with the mountain map are not allowed to look at the river map. They must complete their maps with both rivers and mountains by talking with each other and asking questions. This kind of information sharing is referred to as information gap, and has become a common TESOL technique all over the world.

Here is another simple example. A teacher assigns 10 questions on a piece of paper to student A. Student B is not allowed to view this paper. In contrast, student B is given an article that contains all of the answers to the 10 questions, but student A is not allowed to view the article. Thus, for students to successfully answer all the questions, Student A must ask Student B the questions, and Student B must report those answers to Student A.

Throughout this manual, you will find variations on information gap in order to stimulate conversation. For example, particular information gap activities are:

I'm Looking for Someone Who...

Interaction Lines

Back to Back Information Gap

Headbands

Reading with Half the Words

2. Classic Jigsaw

Jigsaw is a common TESOL reading activity. There are many variations, but in a classic jigsaw, a teacher divides a classroom into four groups (A, B, C, and D). A reading is also divided into four, with one part for each group (so group A reads Part A). The students in each group must read and take notes on each part of the reading. After each group has finished reading the assigned section, students form new groups, with one member from each original group represented (meaning a member of A, B, C, and D all sit down together).

Students now report information to the members of the new group, and every student should take notes on each section of the reading. This gives students a chance to serve both as a reader, a speaker, and a listener, which naturally encourages interaction. Generally, teachers provide questions that the final group must answer, and should monitor each group to provide guidance and answer questions.

3. Cloze Passage Exercise

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The word “cloze” is TESOL jargon meaning “fill in the blank” or “missing information.” A cloze passage generally has missing words or phrases in the form of a space (_____). Students listen to an audio clip, either recorded or spoken, and attempt to fill in the blank with the missing information. The cloze passage is a popular TESOL activity because it gives students an opportunity to listen to a popular song, conversation, or topic that uses authentic language students can identify with.

Teachers often hand out a sheet or use an overhead with some of the words removed or altered. The students then listen to the audio and attempt to complete the missing words. A word bank may be provided, and the audio is generally listened to more than one time. Students are then asked to offer the answers that they heard, either individually or in groups. Students in advanced levels can even create cloze passages themselves and, for example, share favorite songs. See page 33 for an example cloze passage.

4. Journals

Journals are certainly not exclusive to TESOL teachers, but are a powerful way to allow students to communicate at their own speed and comfort, and in a creative and original way. A journal can allow students to express their own opinions, daily habits, lifestyle, tastes and preferences, and so forth. Journals are particularly successful at helping students open up to language as a real opportunity to share ideas, engage in critical thinking, or demonstrate a particular language function (For example, if you wanted learners to use the past tense, you could use the prompt, “Write about a past experience that...”).

Journals are often collected regularly (once a day, twice a week, once a week), and while there is a variety of debate on the matter, a number of teachers find that journals are a time to allow students to explore their ideas rather than to express ideas perfectly. In this light, journals are sometimes not graded in terms of grammatical accuracy, but rather in terms of content. Conversely, other teachers use journals as a way of measuring language output, and students are given writing prompts that reflect accuracy as well as content (Example: Write a paragraph that uses the past perfect. Use vocabulary from the following list.) Those who focus on form should have explicit instructions.

5. Dictation

Dictation may or may not seem like a communicative activity. Dictation can simply mean, “Write down exactly what I say,” and for some teachers, this may seem like an audiolingual or rote-memorization technique. However, dictation activities are often still used today to