

Improv! Helping students cope with the spontaneity of real life

Johanna Stirling, NILE Online Academic Manager
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The games we played and why we played them:

1. Passing game

In a circle. One person says ‘Would you like this X?’ miming giving something to next and the receiver says ‘Ooh, lovely, thank you’ and mimes taking it. They turn to the next person and offer it to them with the same words etc. Let it go on a while and then introduce a new element that at any time a receiver can say ‘Not for me thanks’ and send it back in opposite direction. After a while introduce another element: at any time anyone can ‘eyeball’ (ie make eye contact with) sb else and say ‘Can I borrow your X, please?’ pointing and the other person says ‘My X? Sure, here you are’ and they swap places passing ‘it’ in the middle of the circle. And a fourth element: at any time someone can call out loudly “Quick, here comes the teacher!” and every one changes places and stands to attention. It’ll be chaotic, but encourage them to keep the passing going on.

You can use different language depending on level, age and language aim. It's useful to drill the language first so they can practise using natural pronunciation. But don't worry about accuracy – people will make mistakes but it doesn't matter.

Rationale

Good for practicing different chunks, intonation and listening. Helps get their attention and focus as a warmer. Relatively ‘safe’ as it's controlled but they still have choice.

2. The three-headed expert

Get three volunteers up and sit them in a row of chairs. Explain that they are one person (with three heads) and are an expert in something. Elicit the area of expertise from the audience (get a few and choose the best or combine them). Now either you ask or get the audience to ask the expert questions related to their expertise. The expert answers by each ‘head’ giving one word at a time to build up an answer.

Rationale

They have to listen to each other carefully to make sentences, thinking about grammar and meaning. Make sure it's meaning over accuracy though. Don't correct them or let them correct each other.

3. Random Interactions

Set the scene – a busy place – we used a supermarket, but could be a railway station, airport, theme park, etc. Get each person to think of something someone might say there (not necessarily related to the place) eg

Can you reach that for me please?

Watch out! Someone's dropped some eggs?

Have you got the time please?

Now put students in pairs but instead of A and B, get them to decide who is a 'trolley' and who is a 'basket'. They mingle, either pushing their trolley or carrying their basket. Tell them this never changes (eg if they are a 'trolley', they remain a 'trolley' for the whole game).

(Demonstrate the game as follows) The 'trolleys' find a 'basket' and say their sentence. The 'basket' responds (or asks them to repeat if necessary). Then the 'basket' takes ownership of the sentence the 'trolley' said to them and finds another 'trolley' to say it to. The 'trolley' responds. And so on. It will be chaotic, but so is life!

Stop them and conduct feedback after a while. Ask a few people:

What was the last sentence to said or heard? What response was given?

Were there any you didn't know how to respond to? (Elicit/give different ways to respond)

Can you think of any situations where you didn't know how to respond in English?

Rationale

Students need practice at responding to the unexpected. If the teacher monitors the activity, she can note down where students were struggling to find responses and deal with these later (but don't correct during the activity).

4. The world's most amazing party

In pairs, students plan a party. First they decide what it's to celebrate. Then one person makes a suggestion, the other agrees but saying "Yes, and ..." and adds to that agreement. If it's a silly idea they add something sillier, if it's an expensive idea add something more expensive, if it's colourful make it more colourful etc. Keep adding to each other's ideas for a few minutes.

Then the teacher asks about their parties. They'll be pretty mad.

Rationale

"Yes, and ..."ing is really useful for Cambridge oral exams – students have to listen to each other and respond, and adding the heightening makes it more fun, more creative and more energetic.

5. Gibberish Expert

As a lead in, demonstrate what Gibberish is (a nonsense language) and get everyone to speak at the same time about a simple subject, eg what their day's been like so far. Encourage lots of gestures. They just speak into the middle of the room. Walk round to check that everyone is speaking Gibberish.

(Optional) Put students in pairs A and B. A tell your partner about something that happened today in Gibberish but try to make yourself understood (using gestures, intonation, etc) B asks questions also in Gibberish. Do a quick feedback: ask some B's to say in English what they think their partner told them and ask the A's if that was right.

(Demonstrate the activity as follows) Now get a confident volunteer up. They are an 'expert' in a subject suggested by others. They give a presentation in Gibberish and you/another student are the interpreter. Encourage them to use plenty of gestures and not to say too much at a time. The interpreter says what they think the expert said – they can make it quite ridiculous if they like! The interpreter can also ask the audience for questions, which they then have to translate for the expert.

Then get them to do it in groups of 3 or 4.

Rationale

Good for working on paralinguistic features of communication – body language, intonation, etc. A fun way to practice presentation language. If you choose the topic it could be something that they have recently studied – as revision.

Have fun!!

And remember you and your students need a high tolerance for error!

Contact Johanna at
Johanna.stirling@nile-elt.com

And check out NILE teacher development courses, online and face-to-face, at
<http://www.nile-elt.com>