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Директор ЧУДО ЛЦ «Кембридж»
Стадникова Е.А.

Teaching Tip #4

Teaching English with Minimal Resources

I. Tips and ideas for getting more from a coursebook by Miles Craven

Starter level

Speech bubbles: speaking

- For lower-level students, choose a picture in their coursebook (or magazines - choose famous stars) that has several people in and have them think about what each person is saying.
- This could be as simple as *What's your name?* or *How are you?* but encourage students to be as creative as they can.
- Give them time to think of their ideas, then tell them to write what they think each person is saying in a speech bubble on the picture.
- Finally, put students into groups to practise the conversations they have made.

Pictionary: speaking

This is a good game to review vocabulary that students have covered in class, such as household objects, animals, jobs, food, sports, etc.

- First, make a list of twelve or fifteen words that you want to review.
- Then draw a line down the middle of the board to split it into two sections.
- Divide the class into two teams and explain that one person from each team must come to the board and draw a word that you give them.
- Explain that the students in their team must correctly guess the word.
- When their teammates have correctly guessed the word, they should sit down and another person from their team should come to the board and draw the next word.
- Explain that they have to guess as many words as they can in the time available.
- The team with the most number of correct guesses at the end is the winner.
- Tell each team to elect one person to go first. Give them each a different word from your list to draw and begin the game!

Elementary level

Describe the picture: speaking

- Choose an interesting photograph or illustration from your course book and put students into pairs to describe what they can see. You might want students to concentrate on using a target structure you have recently covered. For example, an elementary class might review the present continuous by saying what each person in a picture is doing. *She is sitting on a chair/He is speaking on the phone*, etc.
- You could turn this into a game by putting students into groups of three or four and having one student ask a question (e.g. *What is she doing?/Who is speaking on the phone?* etc.) while the other students compete to be the first to answer. Students gets one point for each correct answer. The winner is the person at the end of the game with the most points.
- Alternatively, choose a picture that allows them to recycle the vocabulary they have covered in the class, such as clothes, adjectives appearance and character, etc. *He looks shy, I think she's very intelligent.*

Describe the picture: writing

- Tell students to find an interesting photograph or illustration in their coursebook and to write a few sentences to describe what they can see.
- Monitor and provide help as necessary. When they finish, put students into small groups and tell them show their picture while they read aloud their sentences.
- You may wish to make this more challenging by telling students to include three factual errors. For example by writing *The man is wearing a blue shirt* when the shirt is actually white. As they read their sentences their partners must listen carefully to identify the three errors.
- Note: You might want to include useful language for describing a picture, such as *In the foreground/background, on the left/right, in the middle, I think it may/might be...because...*, etc.

Intermediate level

Story building: speaking

- Choose an interesting picture from the coursebook that includes some people and put students into groups to talk about it.
- Tell them to choose one person in the picture and to think in detail about them; they should decide on the person's name, age, job, what they are saying or thinking, where they are going, why, who they are going to see, etc.
- Encourage students to build up as big a story as possible using the picture as a prompt.
- Explain they have to remember all the details as they cannot make notes.
- When students are ready, mix the groups and tell each student to say who they chose and then talk about the story they made up about them.

Vocabulary definitions: vocabulary

- Put students into pairs with one person in each pair facing away from the board so they cannot see what you are writing.
- Write on the board about ten words that you want to review from work previously done in class.
- Tell the students facing the board to choose a word and describe it to their partner.
- Give them a time limit and tell them to record how many words their partner can guess.
- When they finish, have students swap chairs and repeat the activity with a different list of words.

Grammar mime: grammar

You can review grammar structures such as the past simple and past continuous through simple mime, by making a story.

- Write *Last night* on the board and then mime to the class what you did (watched television, ate dinner, etc).
- Have the class call out what you did as you mime each action. When you finish, repeat the mime with students all calling out what you did. Then put students into groups to do the same.
- Encourage them to think up their own original stories and mime them to their classmates.

Vocabulary mime: vocabulary

You can use mime to review certain vocabulary sets, such as sport, jobs, character adjectives, etc.

- Begin by putting students into groups to make a list of as many words as they can connected to each vocabulary set you want to review.
- Have the group with the most words write their list on the board. Check spelling and add any additional words, then model the pronunciation and have the class repeat after you.
- Then choose one word from the board and mime it to the class. For example, pretend to play tennis, be a doctor, be miserable, etc.
- Encourage students to call out the word you are miming. Mime a few more as examples and then put students into groups to do the same.

Upper-intermediate level

Link the pictures: speaking

- Tell students to turn to a page in their coursebooks that has several pictures and to try to think of a situation to connect all the pictures.

- Tell them to build up a story with as much detail as they can. Then tell each group that they must prepare a role play of their story to the class.
- Give them time to decide their roles and what each of them says, then tell them to perform their role play.

Good for any level

How many ... can you find?

A good way to revise grammar is to choose a text from the coursebook and tell students to count the number of times they can see a certain structure. For example, ask *How many examples of the past simple can you find?* or *How many irregular verbs are there?* You can also focus on word forms this way, by asking *How many adjectives/adverbs are there?* etc.

Spelling check

- Choose ten new words that students have recently covered from a unit in the coursebook.
- Write them at random on the board.
- Give students one minute to memorize them, then erase the words from the board and tell students to write down every word they remember.
- Have volunteers come to the board and write the words. Then tell students to turn to the unit where you took the words from and to find each word and check the spelling themselves.
- Finally, practise pronunciation and review the meaning of each word.
- As a variation, rather than choose the words for this activity yourself you could tell the students to look through a unit and make a list of words themselves that they think are difficult to spell. When they finish, have them dictate their list to a partner.

Word jumble

- Choose ten words that you want to review and write them on the board but with the letters jumbled up. For example, jantosirlu (journalist), roeevrttx (extrovert), etc.
- Tell students to unscramble the words as quickly as they can. Then have them look through a unit they have completed and choose five words to jumble for their partner.

II. Using questions by Jackie McAvoy

Following on from Alan Maley's comments on the importance of questions as a low-resource teaching material, here are some (mainly) student-centred ideas.

Round robin topic questions

- Most students have something they are particularly interested in whether it's cooking, surfing the net or watching films.
- Ask each student to think about this, and to choose one interest. When they have decided they write the word or phrase at the top of a sheet of paper.
- Make sure they only write cooking and not I like cooking for my family.
- The paper is then passed to a classmate on their right who reads the topic and writes a question they would like answered about the topic: *What's your favourite dish?*
- Once every student has written a question the paper is passed to the right again.
- Students read the topic, the previous question and then add another, different question: *Do you like cooking for yourself?*
- This continues until there are plenty of questions (if possible each student reads everyone's topic but it depends how many students there are in the class – each question takes longer to write as there are more and more questions to read!).
- The papers are returned to their owners who: a) Answer as many questions as they can b) organize the information so that similar questions are grouped together c) decide on an appropriate order, and finally d) write about their interest based on their answers.
- Alternatively students can use their answers as a speaking activity - in pairs or perhaps open class as a 3-minute lecture.

Ask-me mingle

- Introduce the idea of things that puzzle you. For example I often wonder, when it suddenly gets cold, if there is a certain degree Celsius when you can see your breath.
- This question is written on the board: *Do you know what temperature it is when you can see your breath?* Or perhaps: *Do you know why Liverpool don't play so well anymore?*

- Now ask students to think about something that puzzles them. When they're ready they write a *Do you know...* question on a strip of paper.
- Then all the students stand up and ask this question to their classmates. They listen to the answers and if they like an answer they give the student with the good answer their strip of paper.
- When most students have handed over their strips find out which student has got the most strips and therefore gave the best answers.
- Ask the student to tell everyone what were the replies. Open class discussion can follow if some students never received a decent response – and don't forget to join in with the mingle yourself!

Ask me anything you want!

This is great for a first class.

- Tell students that today, and today only, they can ask you anything they want.
- In pairs students write down their questions – encourage them to go beyond the standard set questions.
- While they are doing this spot a lively character who would be suitable for the next part. When there are enough interesting questions put a chair facing the students and ask your chosen student to sit down.
- Tell the class that this student is you. Ask the student his/her name, if they have understood they should reply with your name and not their own.
- Now the students ask 'you' their questions and the student has to reply. Sit back and refuse to say anything!
- Students enjoy seeing a classmate decide how old you are and often ask more questions spontaneously.
- At the end you can decide to say which questions were answered correctly or not – or just leave the students guessing.

Whose story is it?

- Put students into two groups A and B, preferably in different rooms (or send one lot out into the corridor!).
- One person from each group thinks of a true event, an interesting / unusual one if possible, and tells the story to the rest of the group. Everyone should understand the story and be able to remember it and tell it themselves.
- When everyone is ready both groups sit facing each other. The outline of group A's story is told: *The story is about a house that got flooded.*
- The students in group B ask questions to the students in group A with the aim of deciding who the story really belongs to.
- Students in group A have to reply as though it happened to them. *Ahmed, when did this happen? Last year. Imene, were you in the house at the time? No, I was out shopping.*

Lies! All lies!

- Students realize that teachers have usually travelled to many different countries and no doubt have had many adventures.
- Start by saying 'Did I ever tell you the story about when I was in the Sahara / the Amazon / on safari?'
- Create an atmosphere of suspense and tell your story. (Some teacher-centred story telling like this is a good use of teacher talking time as a 'live' listening).
- When you have finished ask students whether the story was true or false, they may be surprised if you suggest that, perhaps, it was all a pack of lies.
- Get them to vote: hands up those who believe the story, and then those who don't.
- Put students into pairs and together they write questions to find out if the story is indeed true or not. (Personally I think it's a lot more fun if the whole thing is false – it's great fun seeing the students' faces when you tell the story and then when they find out you lied!).
- Students then interrogate the teacher with their questions – the better the questions the easier it will be to find out.
- One more vote to see if any students swapped camp (and perhaps a short, no doubt lively discussion) and then reveal the truth – as it were.

Lies! All lies again!

You'll need a selection of pictures for this.

- Take an A4 piece of card and hold it to you to hide the side facing you from the students.
- Tell them you have a picture of something and they must ask you questions to know what the picture is of. This can start quite slowly but once they get the hang of it questions come more quickly.
- *Is the picture of something outside or inside? Outside, it looks very cold. Is it winter? I think so, there are lots of trees in the bottom left hand corner with no leaves. Are there any buildings? No. It's a kind of park? Yes.*
- When students feel they have a good idea of what the picture looks like turn the card round to reveal – nothing! You made the whole thing up! Then put students into pairs and give student A one card face down.
- Explain that some students will receive a blank card, and others will really have a picture on it. Student A holds the card so that student B cannot see if there is a picture or not.
- Student B then has to ask questions and decide if their partner is really looking at something or nothing. Student B then has a go.
- This can be used for practising the speaking part of the FCE / CAE exam. Modals of speculation can be encouraged too: He might be running from the police. He could be a burglar- he seems to be carrying something.

III. Using questions in teaching English by Alan Maley

Introduction

If we are looking for cheap, easy to make, low-resource teaching materials, then surely questions must come near the top of the list.

Good teaching has always been based on a dialogue between teacher and learner. And a staple element in that dialogue is questions. Good teachers know how to ask the right questions at the right time so as to gradually extend their learners' abilities. They know how to challenge their learners to think, while showing through their manner of questioning that they value the answers their students give.

In this short article, I want to look at questions as used in oral interactions between teachers and learners, and at the kinds of questions we use alongside written texts.

Oral questions

Nunan, (1990) among others, has drawn attention to two basic kinds of questions commonly used by teachers. He calls these 'display questions' and 'referential questions'.

- **Display questions**
Display questions are the kinds of question teachers ask when they want to check whether or not their students have learnt what has been taught. The teacher already knows the answers. All she wants to do is make sure the students know too. e.g. 'How many fingers do you have on each hand?' It is hardly surprising if students sometimes find this kind of make-believe question a waste of their time. It may however have a value, as a way of recycling the new language, particularly in the early stages of learning it.
- **Referential questions**
Referential questions are questions where the teacher does not know the answer, and is genuinely interested in hearing the students' answers. e.g. 'Where do you buy your jeans?' Such questions tend to interest students more, since they call for a degree of personal involvement.
- **Convergent questions**
Another approach to questioning asks if they require convergent or divergent answers. Convergent questions have one correct answer. The aim in answering is to provide that correct answer. Answers are always either right or wrong. e.g. 'How much does X earn every year?'
- **Divergent questions**
Divergent questions may have a large number of acceptable answers. Personalized, opinion-focused questions are a good example of this kind of question. e.g. 'How do you think this story will end?' 'How would you solve this problem?' 'Can you think of a similar situation from your own life?'

It is interesting to observe that, whereas all display questions are convergent, referential questions may be either convergent or divergent.

In general, students respond better to teachers who treat them like real people, and who show a genuine interest in them. This implies that we should consider increasing the use of referential (real) questions, and of divergent questions in class.

There are at least seven types of question we can ask about a written text:

1. Factual questions: the answer to such questions can be found, like a mirror image, in the text itself. e.g. 'How many times did she visit Peter?'
2. Cause/effect questions: here the answer can be found by putting together information from different parts of the text. e.g. 'Why did Jane break up with her boyfriend?'
3. Inference questions: here the answer cannot be found directly in the text: it has to be worked out from partial clues, by 'reading between the lines'. e.g. 'Why did Miss Marple ask about roses?'
4. Opinion questions: the answer to this kind of question requires the reader to commit herself to a personal opinion about what has been read. e.g. 'What do you think about the way Krishnan behaved at the wedding?'
5. Interpretation questions: the reader has to interpret, not simply comprehend, the information in the text. e.g. 'The author mentions Hannah's heart condition in the first line of the story. Why?'
6. Personalized questions: here the reader has to project herself into the shoes of a character and give a personal response. e.g. 'What would you have done if you had been Kes?'
7. Speculative questions: the reader has to speculate about things which are unknowable, because they are outside the text. Yet the text may well provide some indications. e.g. 'What do you think happens to Manuela in her new life with Marco?'

Looking back at these seven question types, it is fairly clear that numbers 1 to 3 are those most commonly encountered in coursebook materials. They are also convergent in nature. There is an answer, right or wrong. Types 4 to 7 are all divergent in nature. As such, they also involve a greater degree of personal investment.

One further observation is that question types 4 to 7 are the kind of things that proficient readers (whether native speaker or not!) tend to do when they read a text for genuine rather than pedagogical purposes. To some extent, type 3 also conforms to this pattern. It could be that such questions are more valuable pedagogically - or at least as valuable!

Given the dominance of types 1 to 3 in materials, perhaps we should consider widening the range of questions to include more of types 4 to 7.

Whatever the case, it is undeniable that the world of questions is one answer to the question, 'How do I teach in a low-resource environment?'

IV. Teaching vocabulary by Adrian Tennant

Level: All. **Aim:** This is a great revision activity.

Procedure:

1. Choose a number of words that you want the class to revise.
2. Place a chair in front of the board facing the class (so that it faces away from the board).
3. Ask one of the students to sit in the chair (with their back to the board).
Write one of the words on the board.
4. The task is for the other students to explain the word on the board (using English) to the student sitting in the chair.
5. Their task is to guess the word.
6. Repeat the activity with the other words choosing a different student (to sit in the chair) each time.

Added value

Level: I & U+ **Aim:** This activity is good for word building and extending vocabulary.

Procedure:

1. Put the class into two teams (for large classes make more teams).
2. Explain that you will give the students a 3 letter word and the teams will take turns to add letters creating longer words.
3. They can rearrange the letters, but must use all the letters + 1.

4. You might want to demonstrate the activity e.g. EAR; Team 1 = REAL; Team 2 = LATER; Team 1 = TALLER etc.
5. Teams continue to take turns until one team can no longer make a word.
6. To keep the game flowing you might want to set a time limit of 1 minute per turn.
7. You may also want to make the game more competitive by scoring. The team that win each round get the same number of points as letters in their word.

Chain words

Level: All **Aim:** Another activity that is useful for revision. This one also has the added bonus of being good for spelling.

Procedure:

1. Sit your students in a circle (if possible – otherwise make sure that everyone knows who they follow).
2. The first student says a word, the next student must say a word beginning with the last letter of the previous word etc.
3. You might want to give a visual demonstration on the board
i.e. Class -> School -> Leg -> Girl -> Lion -> Nut -> Teacher -> Route -> End -> D
4. Keep it snappy by giving very short time limits to think of a word. If a student can't think of a word they must move their chair back and are 'out'. Also, words are not allowed to be repeated. The winner is the last student in (but don't play for too long).
5. If you want you could say that all the words need to be connected to a topic i.e. Food.
Apple -> Egg -> Grapes -> Soup -> Peach etc.

What's the group? (1)

Level: I & U+ **Aim:** This activity is a good way of practising topics and word families.

Procedure:

Students are used to putting words in groups, but often the groupings or categories are too obvious. For more advanced students make the activity trickier by having unusual groupings. e.g. What's the link (topic) for these words: Chip, Slice, Nutmeg, Chop.

Some students might say 'Kitchen' but it could also be 'Football' (A chip(n) is when the ball is lifted over someone's head using the foot, A slice (n) when the ball is miss kicked, To nutmeg (v) is when the ball is kicked through a players legs and the player who kicked the ball runs around the other player and carries on playing with the ball, and, To chop (v) is when one player kicks another player causing them to fall down. Think of a few groupings of your own and then ask the students to think of some of their own.

What's the group? (2)

Level: All **Aim:** This activity is a good way of practising topics and word families.

Procedure:

1. Choose a topic and write down around 8 words linked to that topic (starting with the harder, or more obscure, ones working up to the more obvious).
2. Read the words out one by one and see who can guess the topic first.
3. To make it more competitive put the students into teams and award points depending on how quickly they guess the topic.
4. An example of this activity might be: Boot, Stick, Lights, Belt, Steer, Wheels, Petrol, Drive. = Car or Vehicle.

Homograph clues

Level: E, I, U+ **Aim:** This activity is designed to practise homographs.

Procedure:

1. You need to think of your words and clues before the class but otherwise there are no materials (either dictate the clues or write them up on the board).
2. Think of words that are homographs and then 'write' (or think of a clue for the different meanings).
3. The students need to guess the word. e.g. Part of a tree. [Bark] The noise a dog makes. Where you put your baggage in an American car [Trunk] An elephant's nose.

Words that go together

Level: E, I & U+ **Aim:** This activity is an excellent way of practising collocation and compound words.

Procedure:

1. Choose some words which either collocate or create compounds.

2. Make sure that each word has three or four collocates or compounds.
3. Put your students into teams (groups).
4. Read out (or write on the board) one ½ of the collocation or compound.
5. Each group now has one turn to guess the 'key' word.
6. If nobody guesses, give the next word (clue) and guess again.
e.g. Light ____.
____ work.
____ wife.
Detached ____.
Key word = House.
7. Note: some words will collocate with many words, but tell your students you are looking for one that collocates with all the words on your list).

Who am I?

Level: E, I & U+ **Aim:** This is a good activity to practise adjectives.

Procedure:

1. Each student needs a blank piece of paper.
2. Ask them to write the following:
 - An adjective they think describes themselves.
 - An adjective other people might use to describe them.
 - An adjective that is totally opposite to what they are like.
3. Ask the students NOT to tell anyone what they are writing.
4. Collect in the pieces of paper.
5. Randomly read out the adjectives from the pieces of paper and see if the students can guess who is being described.

Wrong word

Level: All **Aim:** This is a good activity for practising collocations.

Procedure:

1. Choose a number of sentences which contain a word that doesn't really fit (a good source for these is your students' own writing).
2. Write each sentence up on the board.
3. Ask the students to work in pairs or groups. Their task is to discuss each sentence, find the wrong word and replace it with the correct one.
e.g. He kissed her on her laps. (lips).
They war some nice new clothes. (wore). You need to take a jump of faith. (leap).

Onomatopoeia

Level: I & U+ **Aim:** This is a great activity for learners who are auditory learners.

Procedure:

1. Either write up (on the board) or read out a few words that are onomatopoeic e.g. Buzz, Fizz, Wow! Thud, Grrrr, Psst! etc.
2. Ask the students to think of what is 'happening' for each word i.e. Buzz = a doorbell ringing.
3. After they have written down their ideas get them to discuss these in groups (or as a class).
4. As an extension activity you can ask the students to write a short story (or skit) using the words and connections.

V. From the learners by Adrian Tennant

Some of the most productive lessons, and the most useful, can come from the learners. Here are some ideas of how you can incorporate ideas from your learners.

The student test

Most tests actually check what your students don't know rather than what they do (unfortunately this is the very nature of most testing). However, it doesn't need to be like this. Here is an idea to make the whole process far more useful.

Divide your students into small groups (between 3 and 5 students is best). Ask the students to

look back over what they have been learning (you might want to set a time limit). Then, ask the groups to write a test for the other students. The tests can then be exchanged and each group try another test. Once the tests have been done the original group can mark it. Finally, collect all the tests in and take a look at them – particularly at the questions, not just the answers.

Oops!

Make a note of 8 sentences that contain mistakes that your students make – these can be from written work or from when they speak. You will need two pieces of paper (for larger classes you may need more). On one piece write down the eight sentences, but correct 4. On the other piece of paper write down the same eight sentences, but correct the four sentences that on the first piece of paper were left incorrect. Now divide your class into two groups and give each group one of the pieces of paper. Ask the students to work in their groups and decide which sentences are right and which are wrong. Tell the students to correct the sentences that are wrong. The students should make their own copies of the sentences. Next, put the students into pairs – so they are working with someone from the other group – and compare their answers. Finally, collate and discuss as a class.

A student dictogloss

Find a suitable piece of writing from one of your students (sometimes it is fine to work with a piece that contains mistakes as these can become part of the focus of the activity. However, it is worth thinking about how the individual student may react to their mistakes being discussed by all the other students). Tell the students you are going to read out a short text. Ask the students to put their pens down and just listen. Read out the text once and then ask the students to note down all the words they can remember – this should be done focusing on key words and NOT trying to remember everything verbatim. Read out the text again and then ask the students to work in pairs and reconstruct the entire text. Then ask the pairs to compare their texts. Finally, compare their texts to the original and discuss.

An object feast

1. 1st lesson: bring in a small object, or a photo. (For example, I would bring in a photo taken from a visit to the rainforest in South America. Another friend would take in a Boomerang they bought while on holiday in Australia). Tell the story behind the photo/object and then put the students into groups. Ask the students to write questions to ask you. Conduct a Q&A session.
2. 2nd lesson: Ask the students to bring in an object or photo. If your class is large divide into small groups and get them to discuss their photos/objects. In small classes the whole activity can be done together.

Word limits

1. Ask your students to choose 3 words that they have recently learnt and to write these words in their notebooks.
2. Next, ask them to write 4 words that they associate with each of their 'key' words. Put students into pairs or groups and explain the task.
3. Students should take it in turns to explain each of their key words to the other students in their group. However, when explaining they must not use the other words that they wrote down (those that they associated with each key word). They must not mime, draw or resort to L1 either.
4. Often students get better at explaining if they have to do it more than once. Therefore, after the first go put students into new groups and get them to repeat the activity.

The question box

1. 1st lesson. Ask students to write down three questions (you could limit the focus or allow the questions to be about anything) that they would like answered. If you want, this can be done for homework. Put all the questions in a box.
2. 2nd (and subsequent lessons). Put students in groups and ask each group to pick a question from the box. In their groups they should discuss the question (you might want to set a time limit. e.g. 10 minutes) before reporting back to the class. If there is one question of particular interest you might want the class to spend more time on it.

Our project

1. 1st lesson. Put students into groups and explain that over the next X weeks/lessons they are going to be involved in a project. Give the groups 6 minutes to brainstorm project ideas and then two minutes to vote/choose which project their group will do.

- (Alternatively, ask students to think of projects on their own and then form groups where all the students have similar ideas).
2. 2nd (and subsequent lessons). Devote a section of the lesson (from 10 minutes upwards) to the groups discussing their project. During this time they can set tasks for themselves, and each other, that can be done outside the class, discuss progress, exchange information etc.
 3. Note: It is important to have an outcome and time limit for the project. i.e. In 10 lessons time you will 'present' your project to the rest of the class.
This type of project work is extremely motivating for many learners, especially those studying at school where classes are levelled by age, not ability.

VI. Everyday objects by Jonathan Marks

Here are five more activities that make use of the kind of banal, everyday objects people carry round with them – pens, watches, keys, combs, chewing gum, bus passes and so on.

Valuables

1. Introduce the topic of 'valuables'. Ask the class if they've got any valuable objects in their family, if they know anyone who collects antiques, how much they'd be prepared to pay for a vase, a mirror, a painting, the first edition of a book, and so on. Would they buy a vase purely as an investment, even if they didn't like it?
Point out that even fairly recent objects such as toys or records from the 1960s or 1970s can be surprisingly valuable – maybe all objects are potentially valuables? Who knows, maybe they're carrying valuables around with them without realizing it?
2. Ask them each to choose one object they've got with them and to spend a couple of minutes thinking individually about how they might persuade someone to buy it, making full use of exaggeration and invention. You might need to prompt them or help them express what they want to say. For example: "This pen is hand-crafted from the finest quality plastic. The classic design is the result of decades of research into the workings of the finger, wrist and arm muscles, and guarantees smooth, comfortable writing. Look how the ink flows effortlessly onto the page, helping you to express your thoughts fluently. Because of the high production costs, only a limited number of this model were produced, and they are now greatly in demand. This particular pen is believed by some experts to be the one that Shakespeare wrote his plays with." They should also decide on a price that they want to sell their object for.
3. Ask them to stand up and mill around, trying to sell their 'valuables' to each other. As they move from one potential buyer to another, they'll be essentially going through the same 'sales pitch', but not literally repeating – they'll also be refining, polishing, expanding what they say. You might want to wander around and feed in language that they seem to be groping towards, or you might prefer to just leave them to it. Even if they find a buyer, they might want to regard the sale as provisional, and see if they can get a better price from someone else!

Autobiography of an object

1. Ask the members of the class each to choose one object they've got with them in their pockets or bags and to write a short autobiography of it, including reference to the future as well as the past. For example, an autobiography of a pen: "My earliest memories are rather confused. I remember being in a noisy, brightly-lit factory, passing through various machinery and finally being wrapped in plastic with lots of other pens like me. Then there was a long journey in some kind of bumpy, dark container, then a period in a shop, watching all sorts of people come and go before someone eventually bought me and put me in their pocket. That was the start of my most interesting adventures. One day [The story continues.] I don't know what the future holds. I hope some of the stuff that I've written will get published. I hope I get refilled and given a new lease of life. But I suppose I might just end up in a bin, like so many of us." While they're writing, you could make yourself available to help them express what they want to write.

2. Learners then put their objects and autobiographies together on desks – or pinned to the wall, if feasible (it depends what the objects are!) - and read each others' work. They could ask questions for the objects to answer through the voice of their owners – for example, questions to a pen:
3. What's the most interesting thing you've written so far?
How do you feel when your owner makes mistakes with you?
If you could choose to write in a different colour, which colour would you choose, and why?

Variation 1: They could work collaboratively rather than individually.

Variation 2: Instead of writing, they could tell their autobiographies orally, after some mental preparation time.

Variation 3: Diary of an object – the events of one day, or one week.

Dialogues between objects

1. Ask the members of the class each to choose one object they've got with them in their pockets or bags, find a partner, and improvise a dialogue between the two objects – a dialogue between a sandwich and a key, between a nail-file and a ticket, etc. After a while they should finish the dialogue, find a new partner and improvise a new dialogue, and so on. NB. For this activity it's probably best if the learners look at their objects while they're talking, rather than at each other.
2. The objects could then report to the whole class about who they met and what they talked about. For example, a watch might say: "I met a nail file that told me what a glamorous life it leads - you know, how it plays such an important role in making its owner look beautiful and so on. But it didn't sound so glamorous to me, just scratching away at the rough edges of someone's nails and spending the rest of your time in the depths of a handbag full of all sorts of rubbish. At least I get a chance to see a bit more of the world"

Tools for the job

Ask each member of the class to contribute one object they've got with them, and to put all the objects together where everyone can see them easily. Ask them, working in pairs or small groups, to devise a way of using as many of the objects as possible in fulfilling a certain task – and to consider what other resources they would need. For example, the collection of objects might be a pocket dictionary, a cigarette lighter, a calculator, a pencil sharpener, an ear-ring, a bar of chocolate, a photo, a bunch of keys, a CD, a hairbrush, a pair of scissors, a walkman, a piece of chewing gum, a postage stamp, a shop receipt and a watch, and the task might be robbing a bank, repairing a broken window-blind, constructing a model aeroplane, curing a headache, and so on. You might want to prime them to use certain language, such as:

We could use the ... to ...

We could use the ... for -ing

We could use the ... as a ...

The ... would come in handy as a ...

Variation 1: They could choose which task to work on.

Variation 2: Different groups could work on different tasks (but using the same objects).

Which is better?

1. Divide the class into small groups.
2. Ask each member of each group to contribute one object they've got with them, and to put all the objects together where the whole group can see them easily.
3. They should then make sentences of the form "A's better than B because"
4. Depending on their level and their ingenuity, the sentences might include the obvious, such as:

"A sandwich is better than a penknife because you can eat a sandwich but not a penknife"

or the not so obvious, such as:

“A sandwich is better than a penknife because you can cut yourself with a penknife but you can't with a sandwich”

“A bus ticket's better than a sandwich because you can't get food poisoning from a bus ticket”

- NB 1. At higher levels this is likely to take the character of a fluency activity leading naturally to further discussion, whereas at lower levels it might be an early opportunity for learners to practise combining clauses and using ellipsis to form longer sentences; in this case it might be helpful if the groups produce their sentences in writing, with you helping them to make them accurate.
- NB 2. This is an opportunity to practice the weak form 'better than' (orally), and the weak form of 'is' where appropriate (orally and in writing):
'a sandwich is better', but 'a bus ticket's better'

VII. Speaking Activities by Scott Thornbury

In the introduction to this series, I argued that the best classroom activities are those “that not only require no materials but can be adapted to a range of levels and circumstances, and, very importantly, are highly productive”. I gave, as an example, the “Find someone who...” format as an activity type that “scores highly in terms of achieving maximal output through minimal means”.

What other generic activity types score equally highly – especially with regard to developing speaking proficiency? Traditionally, freer speaking is often practised by means of dialogues, role plays, and discussions. In this section we look at the way dialogues can be constructed 'out of nothing':

Dialogue building

This was the first technique that I learned to adapt to any level and any lesson, and it stood me in good stead both as a novice teacher and as a Director of Studies, not least because it is an ideal “stand-by” lesson, i.e. one you can do without preparation when substituting for an absent colleague. The basic format goes like this:

1. Establish the situation, using drawings of (usually two) stick figures on the board. Ask questions to elicit the situation based on visual clues in the picture. E.g. “Where are they? Who are they? Do they know each other? etc”. For example, a picture of someone standing behind a desk, with a key rack behind them, addressing someone on the other side of the desk who has a large suitcase, is all you need to establish a “hotel reception” situation. Speech bubbles complete the scenario.
2. Having established a context and a purpose for the exchange, e.g. “the man wants a room for the night”, start to elicit, line-by-line, the conversation. Depending on the level of the students, as well as the predictability of the dialogue, you can pre-script this in advance, so that you have a clear idea of the dialogue you want to build. Or you can simply construct it as you go along, on the basis of what the students come up with. A hotel reception dialogue is one which – in most cultural contexts – follows a fairly predetermined script, and therefore should not require a lot of “scripting” on the part of the teacher. A dialogue between two friends meeting by chance in the street, on the other hand, may require some pre-scripting, since there are so many possible conversational outcomes, once the initial greetings have been dealt with. I find it best to have some rough idea of how I want the dialogue to go, but, in general, I am prepared to adapt the script according to what the students themselves suggest.
3. So, start by eliciting the first line of the dialogue. In the hotel reception scenario, it might be the receptionist saying “Good morning. Can I help you?” Drill this a few times, both chorally and individually, correcting where necessary, and insisting on natural-sounding rhythm and intonation. It helps if students are familiar with the question “Where’s the stress?” (In this case, it’s on the word help). By the way, it is important – for drilling purposes – that the “lines” of the dialogue are short – not more than about eight to ten words. Anything longer may need to be segmented – preferably into tone groups.
4. Elicit the second line of the dialogue. This is where you may need to give some kind of clue, such as reminding the class of the hotel guest’s needs, if these have already been

established in Stage 1. A likely line might be “Yes, I’d like a room for the night.” Again, drill this and “tidy it up”.

5. Now, put the two lines together. (This is why the technique is called “dialogue building”). Take the role of the receptionist yourself, select a student to take the role of the guest, and together perform the first two lines of the dialogue. Do this with one or two more students, then reverse the direction of the exchange, delegating a student to be the receptionist while you take the guest’s role. Now it’s time to hand it over to the students: while the rest of the class listen, two students (preferably sitting on opposite sides of the classroom, in order to ensure audibility to all) enact the two-line exchange. This is called open pairs. Then two more, and so on. When you think the class is ready, ask them all to practise the exchange with their neighbour (this is called closed pairs). Monitor and correct. The complete sequence can be represented like this:
 1. Teacher – student.
 2. Student – teacher.
 3. Student – student (open)
 4. Student – student (closed)
6. An alternative to stage 3 is to divide the class into two halves, and each half choruses its part of the exchange: this works best with young learners.
7. Of course, the whole process need not be so elaborate, especially if only two lines are in play. But, as the dialogue grows, this basic format will ensure that even quite lengthy exchanges are memorized and practised successfully.
8. 6. Continue building the dialogue, line by line. The hotel reception dialogue might continue like this, for example:

Good morning. Can I help you?
Yes, I’d like a room for the night.
A single or a double?
I’d like a single room with a bath.
etc.
7. Using the interaction model outlined in Stage 5 above, practise the dialogue cumulatively at each stage when there is an even number of lines (i.e. four, six, eight, etc). It may help students to remember the content and sequence of the exchanges if you provide some kind of word or picture prompt on the board, in descending order. A sketch of a single and a double bed, for example, will remind them that the receptionist’s next line is “A single or a double?”. A sketch of a window through which the horizon and a ship is visible will help both to elicit and remember the guest’s line “I’d like a room with a view of the sea.”
8. When the dialogue has been constructed and practised, ask one or two pairs of students to “perform” it in front of the class. Knowing that this is a standard part of the dialogue building sequence may encourage students to take the pairs practice stage more seriously.
9. Now, elicit the dialogue back from the students and write it on to the board, so that learners have a copy to take away.
10. Variations:

Disappearing dialogue

Write a six-to-eight line dialogue on the board and ask learners to read it aloud, and to practise it in pairs. Then, gradually erase words and whole lines from the dialogue. Learners continue practising, each time having to remember more and more of the disappearing dialogue until there is nothing left on the board at all.

Completion

Write one participant’s half of a dialogue on the board, e.g. the overheard part of a telephone conversation. Working together, learners have to reconstruct the original conversation. They then practise and perform it.

Substitution

Once the original dialogue has been learned and practised, ask learners to adapt it by changing some of the key information but still retaining the basic outline. For example, in the case of the hotel dialogue, ask them to change the number of nights, the type of room, the facilities that the hotel offers, etc.

Improvisation

Once the original dialogue has been learned and practised, ask one of the learners to come to the front of the class and perform the dialogue with you. But instead of following the memorized script, respond to the learner unexpectedly. E.g., where in the original, the receptionist answered the guest's request: "I'd like a single room with a bath" by saying "Certainly", you could say, "I'm afraid we don't have any single rooms with a bath". The student then has to improvise an appropriate response, and, if unable to, the rest of the class can be asked to suggest one. Students can then be asked to improvise in pairs.

Students' own dialogues

After Stage 1 (Establish the situation), ask learners, working in pairs or small groups, to write their own dialogue based on the situation. Monitor this task, providing suggestions and correcting errors. Students then practise their dialogues until they are ready to perform them to the class.

Vocabulary review

As in the previous variation, students collaboratively write and perform their own dialogues, but they have to include a certain number of words or expressions that they have been previously taught: e.g. six words from a list of twelve that are connected with the theme of crime, or sport, or politics, etc.

VIII. Listening by Adrian Tennant

An introduction

When we 'do' listening in class there is often a fairly 'standard' approach: Introduce the topic, preteach some vocabulary, set an extensive/gist task, play the recording, set an intensive/comprehension question type task, play the recording again, then check the (correct) answers. This 'standard' approach is a rather superficial way of dealing with listening. Firstly it relegates the listener to the role of a passive eavesdropper (simply overhearing a conversation etc.), and secondly it focuses on the product (i.e. the correct answers) as opposed to the process(es) of listening. Here is a collection of ten 'listening' activities that focus more on the process and aim to encourage the learner to become more than simply an eavesdropper. The activities also require the bare minimum in terms of material and preparation. A copy of the recording and/or the transcript (which can usually be found at the back of most coursebooks) is all that is needed for most of the activities – and the others require even less than that!

I hope you enjoy these activities and find them useful.

Who's speaking?

Choose a dialogue from your coursebook. Ask the students to look at the transcript (usually at the back of the book) and cover the names (these are usually on the left hand side) with a notebook/piece of paper). Ask the students to read the transcript and guess the following: who is speaking – age, sex, relationship etc. (You could also check what they are speaking about and why they are speaking e.g. to invite someone, to give directions, to tell a story etc). Elicit the ideas and write them up on the board. Play the recording and then ask the students if they've changed their mind/guesses.

Rationale: Who is speaking and the relationship between speakers will influence the language used. Getting students to think about these things will help their overall listening skills and their speaking, choice of vocabulary etc.

Add a third

Choose a coursebook dialogue (between two people). Play it and get the students to think about who the people are and what they are talking about. Then ask the students to think about the dialogue and imagine what it would be like if there was a third person involved/speaking. Get the students to turn to the transcript and rewrite the dialogue adding the third person (this can be done working groups of three). Finally, ask a few groups to read out their new dia(tria)logue.

Rationale: Coursebook dialogues are often 'neat' in a way in which real life conversations aren't. Getting students to add a third person also demonstrates a deeper understanding of the material than standard comprehension questions ever could.

Listening Bingo!

Ask the students to draw a grid/table with six boxes (you can use more for higher levels e.g.

nine boxes at Upper Intermediate). Tell them you will play a recording and tell them the topic of the recording (if you want you can give a bit more information e.g. You will hear two people talking about their plans for the weekend). Ask the students to write a word or phrase in each box. These should be things they think they will hear during the recording. Monitor and check they have completed their grids. Play the recording. Every time a student hears a word or phrase in their grid they should cross it out. If they cross out all six, they should put their hand up in the air (or shout 'Bingo').

Rationale: Predicting vocabulary based on the topic is a skill that we all employ in our L1 before and while we are listening.

And the next word is...

Choose a recording. Tell the students the topic of the recording. Play a short piece and then press the pause/stop button. Ask the students to predict the next word (they can do this by whispering their ideas to the student sitting next to them). Press play and let the students hear the word. Don't make any comments at this point. Play another piece and repeat the process. Do this with the whole of the recording. At the end ask the students how successful they were in predicting the next word.

If you want, choose a volunteer student to come out to the front, their job is to operate the tape machine / CD player rather than you.

Rationale: Predicting vocabulary based on the topic is a skill that we all employ in our L1 before and while we are listening. It is also important NOT to check or comment on the accuracy of their predictions while the activity is going on. The aim is not to get it right, but rather to concentrate on the content and vocabulary in order to make it possible to guess.

Finish my sentence

Read out a number of sentences (these can focus on language recently learnt/taught) but don't finish the sentences. Ask students to whisper (or write down) the endings. Possible sentences include things such as: What's your...? Can you pass me the...? Be ...! Where are you...?

Rationale: A low tech version of the previous activity and one that can be very useful for functional language.

Listen to each other

Ask students to think about a topic they are interested in e.g. a hobby, favourite film, a friend etc (this can be set for homework if you want). Ask one student to speak (you can set a time if you want e.g. speak for three minutes). The other students should listen and write down at least two questions they want to ask. When the student finishes speaking the other students should ask their questions. Note: In large classes this can be done in groups.

Rationale: One of the best sources of listening texts is the students themselves.

We often interrupt

Choose a dialogue from a coursebook, e.g. a phone conversation. Read the first line of the dialogue. Ask the students to take on the other role (but without referring to the transcript). Once they have heard your line they should respond. Continue the process (either by using the next line of the coursebook dialogue – this then forces the students to readjust their thoughts – or simply by responding to what the students have said). Finally, if you want, you can get everyone to look at the original transcript.

Rationale: Most coursebook listening activities put the students in the position of eavesdroppers. This is actually a very unnatural state of affairs in most real life listening. One aim of this activity is to make the listening activity much more realistic by making the listener take on an active role.

What do we stress?

Choose a text e.g. a listening from a coursebook. Ask the student to look at the text (transcript) and to read out the first line stressing every third word (you might want to demonstrate this, making sure you over emphasise every third word while keeping the other words unstressed). Next, get a different student to read out the same sentence, stressing every second/forth/fifth word etc. Finally, ask a student to read out the sentence, stressing the words they think would normally/actually be stressed. Next, put students in pairs and ask them to repeat the process for the whole of the text. Monitor and help where necessary. At the end you can play the original recording if you want. However, the aim is not to get the stress correct, but rather to become aware of how stress influences meaning.

Rationale: Teachers often tell students about the way in which English is a stressed language

and we often get students to listen to and practise the 'correct' stress patterns. But, by getting students to try out the wrong stress patterns we might actually make them more aware and tuned into the importance of stressing the words that convey the message.

Fill in the blanks

Choose a text e.g. a listening from a coursebook. Read/dictate the text but only saying the stressed words i.e. the unstressed words should not be said at all, but you should leave gaps where they would be (one way to do this is to say them in your mind). Ask the students to write the complete text (sentence), including the unstressed words.

Rationale: Similar to the previous activity, but this time focussing on unstressed words.

No questions

Choose a recording from a coursebook. Play the recording once and then tell the students you want them to write some questions about the recording. They will ask other students these questions. Play the recording a further two or three times (more if the students ask) and get them to write their questions (this could be done in pairs or small groups). Finally, swap the questions around and play the recording again so that the students can answer each other's questions.

Rationale: This activity gets the students to focus on what they think is important in a listening text and not what the coursebook or teacher feels is important. It is quite interesting to compare the questions the students write to those in the book.