

Managing discussion activities

We often practise speaking in class by asking learners to discuss questions on particular topics in pairs or small groups. In this Teaching Tip, we look at some ways of getting the most out of such activities.

Imagine that your learners are going to have a discussion based on some questions in your coursebook. For example, here are some questions on the topic of neighbours and neighbourly relations:

4 Tell each other about the places where you live now.

- 1 Do neighbours usually say hello when they see each other? Do they stop and chat?
- 2 Do they ever help each other with things like shopping or taking care of children?
- 3 Is it normal for people to visit new neighbours and introduce themselves?
- 4 Do neighbours spend free time together, or organise things together? What do they do?
- 5 Do their children play or go to school together?
- 6 Do people generally live near other members of their family?

English Unlimited Pre-intermediate, Unit 11

Before the discussion

Tell learners that they are going to do some speaking practice.

Before they start speaking, ask them to spend a few minutes reading through the questions and thinking about their answers in silence. Tell them they can take notes to help them remember their thoughts – but be clear that this is not a writing task, so they should not write full sentences! Encourage them to ask you for help if they feel they are lacking key words or expressions for communicating their ideas.

This procedure can greatly increase the amount of learner output and the degree of language sophistication in the discussion. A few minutes' quiet thinking time gives learners an opportunity to form their ideas and decide how best to express themselves in English.

Three techniques

Here are three different ways of managing the discussion activity. In each case, remember to give your learners some thinking time first.

Technique A: Carousel

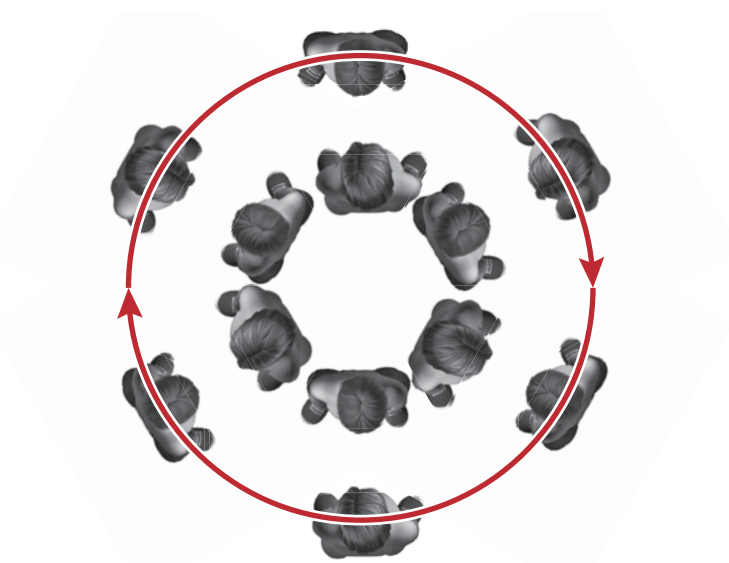
- 1 Ask learners to close their books.
- 2 Put the learners into pairs and give each pair a card with one of the discussion questions.
- 3 Pairs discuss the questions on their cards. Ask them to try and talk for at least two minutes.
- 4 After two minutes, give a signal, e.g. clap your hands or turn the classroom lights off and on. Ask learners to pass round their discussion cards in the same direction so that each pair now has a new question to discuss.
- 5 Repeat 3 and 4 until all the pairs have spoken about all the questions.

Extension: put learners into new pairs and ask them to tell each other about the conversations they had with their previous partners.

Asking learners to discuss the questions one at a time, with a minimum time limit for each question, encourages them to speak at greater length and in more depth. It facilitates classroom management by ensuring that all the learners work through the questions at roughly the same pace.

Technique B: Concentric circles

- 1 Put your learners in pairs and label them A and B. As stand up and form a circle in the middle of the room. Bs stand behind their partners. Then As turn around. Learners will now be facing one another in two concentric circles.
- 2 Say the first question and ask learners to discuss it in their pairs. Ask them to try and talk for at least two minutes.
- 3 After two minutes, give a signal, e.g. clap your hands or turn the classroom lights off and on. The learners in the outer circle move round so they each have a new partner.



- 4 Say the next question for learners to discuss.
- 5 Repeat 3 and 4 until the learners have spoken about all the questions.
Extension: learners sit down with their original partners and tell each other about the conversations they had with other members of the class.

Again, this technique encourages learners to give longer responses and avoids the problem of some pairs rushing through questions more too quickly. The physical movement and frequent changes of partner help to maintain the learners' interest.

Technique C: Class survey

- 1 Give each learner a piece of paper with one of the questions at the top. (If there are more learners than questions, some learners will have the same question.)
- 2 Learners stand up and mingle. Their aim is to talk to all the other learners in the group, ask their question and make notes on their piece of paper of the answers they receive. Set a time limit, e.g. ten minutes.
- 3 After ten minutes, learners sit down and prepare to give a brief summary to the class of the answers they received to their question. (If some learners had the same question, ask them to work together to compare their notes and prepare a single summary.)
- 4 Listen to and discuss the summaries of the various questions as a class.

The emphasis here on gathering, comparing and summarising information makes this an activity particularly suited to learners at intermediate level and above.