DISCUSSIONS
Teacher's Book

How to have effective discussions

An ESL / EFL Teacher's Book
for the AZ series of Discussion exercises

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(author of *Discussions AZ*, Cambridge University Press)

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DISCUSSIONS Teacher's Book

1. English language - ESL, EFL, and TEFL textbooks

2. ESL and EFL discussions for non-native speakers

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4. Practice for IELTS, TOEFL, TOEIC, TSE, FCE, Cambridge exams.

5. B2, C1, C2: European Framework of Reference for Languages

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Introduction

This teacher's book

This book begins directly by telling you how to use the exercises, as this is probably what you want to know first! The book then gives further details about how the exercises are organized, strategies for having an effective and enjoyable discussion, and a list of 'useful phrases' that students can use during discussions.

The book is also

- designed to help you exploit the exercises in the various Discussions books. Further details are also contained in the Introduction at the beginning of each book

- full of practical advice, based on the author's 30 years of experience of teaching as well as on interviews with over 20 EFL / ESL teachers of many different nationalities, ages and backgrounds

For further ideas on teaching English as a foreign / second language: tefldiscussions.com/teaching-tips

If you have any feedback on this book or if you notice any typos (or missing or misleading information), then please contact: adrian.wallwork@tefldiscussions.com

The AZ series

The following books are part of the series. The ones marked with an asterisk are based on an AZ format.

Discussions AZ - Intermediate (published by Cambridge University Press) *

Discussions AZ - Advanced (published by Cambridge University Press) *

Discussions Volume 1 *

Discussions Volume 2 *

Discussions Volume 3 *

Elementary Discussions AZ *

Business Discussions AZ *

Discussions You've Never Had

Discussions One-to-One

Warm Ups - general English

Warm Ups - business English

The Book of Days (originally published by Cambridge University Press)

Aims of the books

My aims were to produce books that:

- are stimulating and fun to use

- have exercises that entail very little time to set up, but can be adapted and extended very easily

- would cost little to publish and thus little to buy - so they are short (but very meaty!) and there are no photos or illustrations

- teachers can carry around with them - the AZ books are not only short, but they are small and weigh very little

- are green - because of the low cost, there is no need to photocopy the books. Instead class sets can be bought

Some topics are totally conventional (sport, hobbies, movies, education), but I hope to have presented them in an alternative light.

However in *Discussions Volumes 2 and 3*, and in *Business Discussions*, some of the topics are controversial (sex, racism, politics). I have tried very hard not to offend anyone. Three readers have carefully checked for any sensitive topics that might be presented in a non-sensitive way. I have constantly had in mind the comments of my editor at Cambridge University Press who was adamant that she would not publish a book which contained controversial topics:

My colleagues and I are in constant touch with hundreds, if not thousands of teachers and in my judgement it is simply not on. I have also seen other publishers get their fingers very burnt with this sort of thing and it's very messy indeed.

I hope to have found a way to present controversial topics in a way that does not offend either teachers or students.

Section 1: How to use the *Discussions* books

1.1. How should I use the exercises?

On the next page are some ideas of how to exploit the first unit (Applications) of *Discussions Vol. 2.* Like every unit, Applications contains four parts or sub-themes. These four parts (A1, A2, A3 and A4) contain different types of exercises that are typical of those you will find in the *Discussions* series.

For each part (A1, A2, A3 and A4) I suggest:

- a pre-discussion exercise (see also 1.7)

- a possible approach to using each exercise

- a follow-up exercise (see also 1.7)

You can use the same procedures with similar exercises, or of course adopt your own approach.

The keys to the exercises are in the following box:

A1

1, 4, 5, 6, 8, 9, 10

QLESS was an April Fool's joke in 2016 (http://acsacs.co.uk/blog/the-best-of-april-fools-day/); 2 and 3 were invented by the author

Quicken was launched in 1993.

A2

For more details on these types of jobs see:

https://80000hours.org/2015/08/what-are-the-10-most-harmful-jobs/

A3

1) a   2) b   3) a)   4) b   5) b   6) F   7) T   8) T   9) T   10) T

A4

1) advert/advertisement, brilliant, information, problem (as in *no prob*), typographical error, university 2) also known as, all the best, as soon as possible, by the way, in my humble opinion, for your information, laugh out loud / lots of love, oh my god 3) please, regards, weekend, your 4) give me, got to, hi there, kind of 5) breakfast+lunch, motor+hotel, smoke+fog, video+(b)log 6) someone, tonight, are you free (mispronunciation of *three*) tonight, before, waiting for you

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APPLICATIONS

A1: Killer Apps

Look at the ten apps below. Which seven do you think were actually put on the market and sold?

1. Anti Mosquito: Emits ultrasonic waves to repel mosquitoes.
2. CrossClass: Allows you to merge head shots of classmates and friends with photos of blown-up heads of strange (but real) insects and lizard-like creatures.
3. Dreme: When sleeping with earphones, video-records your dreams.
4. Ghost Radar: Detects paranormal activity by identifying words said by ghosts.
5. iBeer: Simulates a beer can that empties itself as you tilt it.
6. Pocket Fan: Triggers a rotating fan on the screen (obviously no air comes out!).
7. QLESS: Scans for mobile numbers of those in front of you in the queue and then proceeds to call them with fake emergencies that will force them to sacrifice their place in the queue.
8. Toilet Sound Machine Extreme: Plays a toilet sound.
9. Lookalike: This dating app has a feature that allows you to find a celebrity who looks like you.
10. Drnk Pay: If you get drunk, the app blocks your bank card until you a sufficiently sober again.

Read the extract from an article from *Newsweek* below.
In what year do you think Quicken was launched: a) 1993 b) 2003 c) 2013?

> "I couldn't do without it now," confesses Karen Jacob of Cincinnati, Ohio. "I'm very dependent". The object of such addiction is Quicken. Quicken keep track of checks, credit-card expenses, monthly bills. Mundane stuff, maybe. But personal-finance software is one of the fastest-growing segments of the industry, says David Tremblay, research director of the Software Publishers Association. Quicken is what the industry calls a "killer app." - an application so powerful that many consumers say it alone justifies the purchase of a home computer.

Ask and answer the questions.

1. What are your favourite apps and why? What was the most recent app you've downloaded?
2. What's the most expensive app you've ever bought? Was it worth what you paid?
3. Which is the most popular app at the moment?
4. How much do you rely on apps? What apps could you not live without? How did people manage before the app was created?
5. What do you think are the most downloaded apps at the moment for your generation? And for your parents' generation?
6. If you could create an app what would it be?

Killer Apps: Optional pre-reading exercise

Ask whole class whether they know what *app* is short for. Then choose two or three students and ask them approximately how many apps they have, and which they like the best.

Put students in groups. Ask them to generate 3 or 4 questions that are aimed at finding out which apps their classmates use, why they use them, which are their favourites etc.

Finally, EITHER rearrange the groups and get students to ask each other their questions. In this case you can probably ignore the third part of the exercise on the student's page (i.e. *Ask and answer the questions*)

OR hand out the photocopies and start with the first exercise.

Killer Apps: Discussion exercises

EXERCISE 1 (*Look at the ten apps*)

Ask students to underline any words they don't know (e.g. *repel mosquitoes, paranormal, ghosts, can, tilts, celebrity, sober*). They can either look the words up on Google Translate, ask each other, or ask you.

Put students in pairs or groups, and get them to complete the exercise. This should take around 5-10 minutes.

EXERCISE 2 (*Read the extract*)

This exercise, like many others in this book, is to designed to surprise students with counterintuitive information, i.e. that apps were first developed in the 1990s. This fact should get them discussing where

these apps were located (i.e. on PCs rather than phones). The exercise should take around 5 minutes. The answer is in the key (see page 11).

EXERCISE 3 (*Ask and answer the questions*)

If students have done the optional pre-reading exercise, then they might be curious to compare their questions with the ones in the exercise. If you want to focus on grammar, then ask students to identify how many tenses are used: present simple, past simple (active and passive), present perfect, second conditional. They can then check against the questions they asked, to see if they have any matching tenses, and whether their usage of the tenses is the same as the usage in the exercise.

If students have <u>not</u> done the pre-reading exercise, they can read all the questions, and then do one or more of the following:

- choose 3 questions to ask their partner
- take it in turns with their partner (or group) to ask and answer all the questions
- cover the questions and try to remember at least three to ask their partner

Killer Apps: Follow up

In a multinational class, it is interesting to compare the top apps in each country and see to what extent these apps reveal cultural aspects of the student's country.

If you want students to do some written work for homework, then they could choose either question 5 or 6 from the third exercise as an essay title.

This exercise is typical of the more controversial exercises that are a hallmark of the *Discussions* series, particularly *Discussions Vol. 3.*

A2: Job applications

Assuming you had the right qualifications and you desperately needed a job, which of <u>one</u> these jobs would you apply for? Which two would you <u>never</u> apply for, even if you were truly desperate?

DESIGNER OF FACTORY FARMS: analysing the least amount of space for an animal to live in while being the most productive possible.

CONTRACTOR FOR FOREST CLEARING: on behalf of the government, clearing huge expanses of forests where indigenous people currently live. The aim is to provide more room for planting crops or grazing livestock (both the crops and the meat from the livestock are then sold to the West).

FINANCIAL LAWYER: helping the mega-rich minimize the tax they pay. This deprives governments from money for public projects for all citizens.

LOBBYIST FOR PRIVATE PRISON: lobbying the government to imprison more people for longer, even ones that pose little threat to the public.

LOW-LEVEL HUMAN RESOURCES EMPLOYEE AT WEAPONS MANUFACTURER: reviewing CVs for a company that designs toys that explode on impact and are designed to maim children.

PART OF MARKETING TEAM OF A BANK: stipulating contracts for large loans with people who it is clear will have difficulty ever paying the loan back.

RESEARCHER FOR ONLINE GAMBLING COMPANY: analysing the compulsive behaviours that make certain types of people addicted to gambling, thus enabling the company to carry out targeted marketing.

SOFTWARE DEVELOPER FOR MASSIVE TECH FIRM: developing tools that can be used to aid the surveillance, detention and deportation of immigrants.

Job applications: Optional pre-reading exercise

Ask students to discuss in groups their ideal job and also <u>two</u> of the worst jobs they could ever imagine doing - one 'worst job' should be a low-paid job and one a high-paid job (like the ones in the exercise). The idea of the latter part of this exercise is that they will be more

motivated to read the 'worst' jobs on the page from the book and see if any of them match the ones that you thought of.

Job applications: Discussion exercise

Unlike A1, in A2 there is only one exercise. It is designed to promote a much longer discussion than the three exercises in A1. This sequence, i.e. short simple exercise (A1) followed by a 'heavier' exercise (A2) is fairly typical of the whole book. The first section tends to be much lighter than the subsequent three sections.

Hand out the photocopies and get students to make their three choices, i.e. one job that they might do, and two jobs that they would never ever do.

Get them to spend a couple of minutes writing notes justifying the choice of the one job that they might do given certain circumstances.

In groups, students then discuss the jobs that they would be prepared to do and they also define the circumstances that might persuade them to do such a job.

Either in the same group, or in rearranged groups, students discuss which they consider to be the worst jobs. The aim is to reach some kind of group consensus with the regard to the two worst jobs.

As a whole class, get feedback from each group, and have a vote on the two worst jobs.

The steps outlined above should produce at least 15 minutes' worth of discussion. If students are allowed to digress and go off at a tangent, then the discussion could take up an entire 60 minute lesson.

Job applications: Follow up

In multinational classes, get students to give you feedback on what are considered to be the best and worst jobs in their country.

Written exercise: Ask students to write an essay comparing three or four of the eight jobs on the page. The aim is to use words such as *although, whereas, on the other hand* etc, and to organize the essay formally with an introduction, series of arguments, and then a conclusion.

Like many exercises in the *Discussions* series, this exercise is designed to surprise students with counterintuitive facts and figures.

A3: The appliance of science

Scientists apply their knowledge and techniques in a variety of areas, with some interesting findings and inventions! Choose the correct answer (a or b) to the questions 1-5, and decide whether 6-10 are true or false.

1. It rains more a) at the weekends b) on weekdays.

2. Cars were first started with ignition keys in a) 1919 b) 1949.

3. Sugar was first introduced to chewing gum by a) William Semple (a dentist) b) William Wrigley Jr.

4. Doctors manage to predict the day that a baby will be born in a) 1 in 10 cases b) 1 in 20.

5. Tomato ketchup was once sold as a) an additive in pet food b) a medicine.

6. Non-experts are able to distinguish between a fake smile and a genuine smile in two very similar photographs of the same person.

7. There is a correlation between a person's level of optimism and how long they will live.

8. Studies of twins highlight that between 50-80% of the variance in levels of happiness can be explained by differences in their genes, rather than in life experiences.

9. In marital interactions it takes at least five good or constructive actions to make up for all the damage done by one critical or destructive act.

10. People will readily fabricate reasons to explain their own behaviour - in scientific terms this is known as 'confabulation' which is defined as the production of distorted or misinterpreted memories but without the conscious intention to deceive.

Now look again at numbers 7-10. How would you set up some scientific experiments to prove or disprove these statements?

The appliance of science: Optional pre-reading exercise

A3 is an example of an exercise that could be used as a self-standing warm-up activity or as an introduction to a lesson on the topic of science.

I personally don't think it requires any lead-in. Just simply distribute the photocopies and away you go!

The appliance of science: Discussion exercise

Get students to read the 'quiz' and go over any vocabulary difficulties (as suggested for the first exercise in A1).

Either alone, in pairs, or in groups, students complete the quiz. They then compare, and above all justify, their answers.

Refer students to the key (see page 11 of this Teacher's Book), or simply give them the answers orally. They can discuss which ones they got wrong and which answers they found the most surprising.

As a whole class, try to get students to analyse / justify why the answers are correct.

If you have a group of students who are interested in sciences, then they could use the last part of the exercise (*Now look again at numbers 7-10*)

The appliance of science: Follow up

For me, this kind of quiz exercise doesn't really require or lend itself to any particular follow-up. I think you can kill an exercise if you are too 'didactic' about it - just let your students have fun, and leave it at that!

This exercise is a bit of an outlier in that there are not many exercises that are directly related to an analysis of the English language. It is designed to show just how flexible and fun the English language is. On the other hand, the format of the exercise is typical: a short introductory text followed by a series of questions that are not comprehension questions but simply on the same topic as the text.

A4: Aka App

English is a very flexible and playful language. The word *app* is an abbreviation of *application*, and *application* is itself an abbreviation of the computer term *application program*. The phone app WhatsApp is a merge of *What is up? / What's up?* (or *wazzup*) meaning 'what is going on in your life?' And *ad* is an abbreviation of *advert* which itself is an abbreviation of *advertisement*.

Answer the questions.

1. The English language frequently abbreviates long words into shorter ones. Do you know what the long forms are of these words: *brill, info, prob, typo, uni?*

2. Acronyms are a very common form of abbreviation. What do these acronyms stand for: *aka, atb, asap, btw, imho, fyi, lol, omg?*

3. Sometimes vowels are removed to create a short form of words e.g. msg = message. What do the following stand for: *pls, rgds, wknd, yr?*

4. Native English speakers like to contract words, e.g. *wanna* = want to. Are you familiar with these contractions: *gimme, gotta, hiya, kinda?*

5. Another method of abbreviation is merging two words, e.g. *drailing = drunk emailing*. Do you know what the following words are merges of: *brunch, motel, smog, vlog?*

6. Before the advent of predictive texting, a common form of abbreviations in text messages was to use the sounds of letters + numbers, e.g. *cul8er = see you later*. Can you guess what the following mean: *som1, 2nite, ru32nite, b4, w8in4u?*

What kinds of words do you abbreviate in your language (e.g. people's names)?

Can you play with your language in the same way as English can be played with?

Aka App: Optional pre-reading exercise

The title of this exercise (A4) - *Aka App* - refers to the fact that an *application* is also known as an *app*.

Ask students what AKA (*also known as*) means and whether they think their language, English, or another language is the most fun and flexible. Obviously this will entail defining *fun* and *flexible*.

Note however that this approach overlaps with the last two questions on the page (i.e. *What kinds of words ... Can you play ...*)

Aka App: Discussion exercise

Set this exercise as a competition. Give students five to ten minutes (depending on their level) to answer as many of the questions (or parts of the questions) as they can. The competition can either be individual or as pairs/groups.

Students check their answers in the key. Find out who managed to answer the most questions correctly.

Check their answers and get feedback on the ones that students i) actually use, ii) like the most.

As a class, discuss when such abbreviations and 'merges' are appropriate, i.e. their varying levels of informality.

Aka App: Follow up

In either a multilingual or monolingual class, ask students to write an essay explaining what they most like about their language and how difficult they think it is compared to other languages. They should mention the elements of their language that foreign speakers have most difficulty with.

These essays can then be used as a basis for discussion in the next or a future lesson.

1.2. How are the speaking activities organized?

Most exercises on the student's page consist of a set of questions to discuss. When these questions are preceded by an introductory reading passage they should not be treated as comprehension questions but as a springboard to discussion.

Ask students to read all the questions and select the ones they wish to discuss. Alternatively, divide students into small groups and ask them to discuss only the first five (or whatever number you choose) of the questions. Those who finish their discussion quickly can be asked to move on to the other questions, whilst the more loquacious groups are given enough time to finish answering the first questions.

Don't let students think they have to stick to answering the questions directly. Let them float around the questions and bring in their own ideas. Questions not discussed in the lesson can be set as titles for compositions for homework; or written summaries can be made of those questions that were answered during the lesson.

1.3. Where do the reading texts come from, how should I use them?

The books were all written over a period of around 30 years. Thus there is an incredible mix of sources - from books written in the 1980s

and 1990s (many of which are now out of print) to online information from the late 2010s. There are even texts taken from sources from the 1920s and 1930s.

All the texts are authentic - they have already been published elsewhere and have been abridged or adapted for this book. They have been kept deliberately short and are not designed to develop specific reading skills. Encourage students to guess:

> • where the texts come from - newspapers, scientific journals, interviews, literary works, websites, online newspapers, blogs

> • why they were written - to inform, instruct, convince, advise, shock, amuse, deceive

> • who they were written for - age group, sex, nationality, specialist, casual reader

> • when they were written (where applicable) *.

Although the aim of the text is not to act as a comprehension exercise, students should obviously understand most of what they read. Pre-teach any vocabulary that you feel are essential for your students to understand or get students to look up the translation.

1.4. Do I need to be careful when choosing a topic to discuss?

Before using this book, make sure students understand that the overall aim is for them to have a productive discussion. You might also want to add that the exercises do not necessarily reflect your own personal attitudes (or those of the author). Instead, the exercises are simply designed to get students thinking about topics that they may not have thought about before and to get them to see a possibly different point of view. When you ask students to do any exercise, give them the opportunity to tell you that they would prefer not to do it. So always have an alternative exercise ready.

The same year that my book *Discussions AZ Advanced* was published, Cambridge University Press (the publisher) got a letter from a teacher whose students found an exercise to be 'offensive'. The exercise was to decide which of the following are 'worse': eating live monkey brain, eating a snake, eating sheep's eyeballs, or eating raw fish. The student in question was Japanese, and according to the Vice Principal of the school:

He was so upset about it that he felt it appropriate to have his feelings expressed to you. I too find this section offensive because

of the title Which is worse? which implies that there is something
very wrong with it. Many people find nothing wrong with any of
these items.

In 1997, when I wrote the book, I was relatively inexperienced and felt
that students and teachers certainly had the option to say that none of
them were wrong.

Today, more than 20 years later, I have become considerably more
sensitized to the problems that certain topics can provoke.

If you are not unsure about the suitability of a topic:

- check with other teachers whether they have ever had a class
  discussion on the same or similar topic and how it went

- ask the students themselves if they are OK to discuss the topic
  (see 1.4)

1.5. How can I know in advance what topics / exercises my students may have difficulty with?

A very simple way to check possible problem areas, is to give each
student a copy of the subject index. This index can be found at the end
of each book.

Ask students to put a tick against any subjects that they would particularly <u>like</u> to discuss, and a cross against those they would feel <u>uneasy</u> about.

I would also get them to write their name, so that you know exactly who has problems with what. This means that 'uneasy' topics could be discussed in such people's absence. This may also enable you to check out any extreme or prejudiced opinions your students may have. Although these could actually be used to good effect (as a kind of devil's advocate), they might upset other students.

Don't attempt subjects that are simply outside the realm of your students' experience - no amount of imagination is going to be able to surmount the problem. Imagine that you ask them to pretend, for example, to be part of a doctors' ethics committee. Although they can't be expected to know what a real doctor would do, that shouldn't stop them saying what they personally would do if they were in such a position.

If you do unwittingly embark on an exercise which students find too difficult or embarrassing, or which promotes little more than uneasy silence, just abandon it - but try and predict such events and have back-up exercises at the ready.

Most exercises in this book have been designed to be flexible, and an exercise that might appear to be too difficult or delicate can often be

adapted to suit your students' needs. In countries where students are likely to seize on a writing exercise, however brief the writing, and use it as a substitute for speaking rather than a prelude to it, you may need to rethink some of the exercise instructions. For example, imagine that students are asked to rate some moral values from one to five according to unacceptability. Don't let them get hold of their pen and merely write numbers, but give them clear-cut instructions which they can't avoid talking about: 'Look at the situations below and decide if they are wrong. If they are wrong, how wrong are they? Tell your partner what you think and give reasons for your opinion'.

1.6. What ground rules do I need to set up for class discussions?

For discussions to work with your students, it is a good idea to elicit ideas from students on what makes a good discussion. Together, you can set some ground rules that will help make discussion activities effective. Here are some guidelines:

- A discussion is not a series of monologues or parallel lines of thought, but a crossflow of interacting ideas which develop, challenge or deliberately break with a previous idea.

- Listening attentively is just as important as speaking clearly. We must be just as interested in what other people say as what we say ourselves.

- Participants should be given time to think - about what they themselves want to say and about what others have said.

- Too much agreement will kill a discussion, so opposite points of view and directions should be encouraged. In fact, where there is total agreement it is not a bad idea to assign the role of devil's advocate to one or two students in each group.

- Everyone should be given an equal chance to speak and an equal time allowance. Only one person should speak at a time. Obviously, this ground rule needs to be flexible (a debate will be more lively if people are given a chance to cut into and comment on what other people say), and also carefully managed.

- Any judgements passed should be constructive rather than dismissive.

As a class, you could also examine to what extent and why a classroom discussion is different from a discussion that we might have at dinner, and whether there should be a target to the discussion and a time limit.

At the end of the above analyses, put the class into groups where they write down in a simple format the ground rules they have been discussing. Examples:

We must collaborate and take equal responsibility for the success of the conversation.

If we ask someone a question we should:

- show verbal interest in their answer
- possibly ask a follow up question

If someone asks us a question we should:

- reply
- transfer the question back – a) by asking their opinion, or b) by asking them a related question

We should think about

- whether our partner / group will understand what we are talking about
- what background information would be helpful to give them

We should listen carefully at all times to anything that is being said.

At the end of the discussion, we should evaluate how the discussion has gone.

1.7. What preparatory and follow up exercises could I use?

Writing based on the text

Depending on the type of text, as a written follow-up, students can:

- Rewrite the text from a different point of view.

- Imagine and recount what happened either before or after the event described in the text. Alternatively they can write up an interview with the people mentioned in the text. This interview could even take place ten years later, to find out their new situations or feelings.

- Summarise the text, or simply delete any words or phrases that they consider could be redundant.

Writing based on the discussion

Students can write a summary of their discussion, bringing in all the viewpoints of their classmates.

Grammar

These books are designed primarily to improve your students' oral fluency. However, many exercises will entail students using (and thus potentially practising) a wide range of grammar items, particularly tenses.

The most common tenses or verb forms used in the exercises are:

- present continuous (trends and current activities)

- second conditional (a lot of exercises encourage students to think what they *would / might* do in certain situations)

- present perfect (where students talk about their experiences)

- *used to* (their past habits, and the habits of parents, grandparents)

- future forms - *will*, *going to*, future continuous, future perfect

- *should, must, have to, need* (in the context of discussions on ethical questions)

So part of your preparation could be to decide (above all from the questions rather than the texts) what kind of grammar might come up, and decide how you could fit this in with your regular lessons. For instance you could use the discussion as a means for open-ended use of a grammar item that you have already taught, or as an introduction to a grammar item that features in the next unit of your course book.

Follow-ups could include typical grammar exercises in which students have to differentiate between two tenses or grammatical forms.

Listening

We plan at a later date to have a whole series of listening exercises associated with the exercises. In any case, you can find YouTube videos or TED presentations on many of the topics discussed in the books. These could either be before the discussion to enable students to have more things to talk about, or after the discussion for consolidation and for hearing different perspectives.

Section 2: How to have a good discussion

2.1. What is the aim of a conversation / discussion lesson? What are the benefits?

Students need to be clear what the aims of a discussion activity are.

A discussion is NOT:

- an exercise aimed at improving accuracy
- designed to introduce or practise new grammar

A discussion is an opportunity to:

- speak reasonably fluently, but not worrying about making mistakes
- become so lost in the topic that you forget you are speaking in English
- increase confidence
- get to know the others in the group better

However, students must feel that they have learned something. It is a good idea to monitor and write down mistakes for analysis at the end of the lesson or in the next lesson (see 2.18). If no such analysis is made, many students will think they have been wasting their time.

Thus it is essential that students understand that there are benefits of discussions, and that outside the classroom the ability to speak English

fluently nearly always outweighs the ability to speak English with no grammar or vocabulary mistakes. There are few situations where oral accuracy is of paramount importance (e.g. exams, formal presentations, important meetings). Instead, most discussions are aimed at exchanging ideas, the accuracy from a language point of view is in terms of how these ideas are expressed is normally only secondary.

2.2. What strategies can I teach my students to improve their ability to have a good discussion?

Think of how we and our ELT coursebooks teach the four skills - reading, writing, listening and speaking. We help students in reading by training them how to scan, skim, read for detail etc; in writing by teaching them how to select and organise their materials; and in listening by helping them to concentrate on essential items or the gist. But what do we do for their speaking? We practise stress and intonation, create mini-dialogues together, give them lots of role plays.

But when it comes to conversation and discussion we only tell them WHAT to talk about.

Rarely do we give them strategies on HOW to talk about it.

The word 'discuss' originally meant to 'cut' with a similar origin as 'dissect'. This meaning, along with its current use of 'examining the

pros and cons' gives a good idea of what a discussion is all about, i.e. a dissection of an argument into various parts for analysis, followed by a reassembling of all the relevant elements to a draw a conclusion from the whole.

One problem with question answering is that without some coaching on how to answer questions, students may simply answer 'yes', 'no', 'it depends', etc., and then move on to the next question. Many of the 'questions' in this book have been formulated as statements, and students have to express to what extent they agree with such statements. Such statements avoid a simple 'yes/no' answer. Others are designed to be deliberately provocative, where students are encouraged to explain their point of view.

For example, in *Discussions Volume 1* there is an exercise on E-piracy (illegal downloading etc). The questions include:

> Do you pay a legal streaming / subscription service to get movies and TV series to watch?

> How much is price a factor when deciding whether to legally or illegally obtain a movie, album, book etc.?

> How do you personally decide whether to opt for a legal or illegal method? Are you worried about infringing copyright? Do you think that you could ever be 'discovered' and sanctioned by the authorities if you make illegal downloads?

> Does the type of product (movie, music, book) influence your decision as to whether or not to buy something legally or illegally?

> What impact do illegal downloads have on the film, music and software industries? To what extent do you care about these impacts?

> Do you think that digital piracy is fair because it allows everyone, whatever their income, education and country, to access cultural products?

These questions are designed to be sufficiently varied in type: some could be answered 'yes/no' but most are designed to encourage a wider debate.

An alternative approach is not to give the students any questions at all. Instead you present the topic (e-piracy) and get students in groups to

- define what e-piracy is

- write two questions based on their own personal usage of digital media

- write two questions that address the wider issues of e-piracy

If students generate their own questions

- they can then compare them with the questions in the actual exercise - both in terms of topic but also more crucially on how the questions are phrased (students can compare the grammar and vocabulary used in the exercise and what they produced themselves)

- they will be more motivated to ask and answer questions that they have generated themselves. They will have a sense of ownership of the questions which will also stimulate them to listen carefully to the answers they receive

A similar approach can be used for brainstorming. Suppose you're brainstorming the students on the ideal qualities of a judge. Without

any prior instruction, most students will come up with personality characteristics such as intelligent, well-balanced, rational, experienced - which is fine. But it would be more productive if students first wrote down a set of questions related to judges: *Why do we need judges? What is a judge? How old should he be?* Even the phrasing of questions can be indicative of how we see a judge - why do we refer to a judge as 'he' and not 'she'? Are men more rational, and therefore better judges than women, and why is it that there are so few female judges? You should add other, less orthodox questions, to provoke your students into thinking about other aspects of being a judge, e.g. *how relevant are race, height and physical appearance, hobbies etc.*? Students may think that the height of a judge is totally irrelevant - this is probably true (though some research has shown that there is a link between height and intelligence) - but often by saying what is not important we get a clearer idea of what is important.

Now let us see how we can apply the same approach to problem-solving activities. Suppose your students are part of a government board which gives funding to scientific research projects (Ex. V4 in *Discussions AZ Advanced*, Cambridge University Press). Their task is to decide which one of the following projects to give money to: (1) a group of marine archaeologists who believe they have found Atlantis; (2) some alchemists who have found a way to convert the Grand Canyon into gold; and (3) some generic engineers who have developed a way to produce square fruit.

In order to generate a valuable discussion students should begin by writing down a series of related questions: *Why did the scientists*

propose the projects? Is there a real need for such a project? Is it practical? Do we have the necessary technology to carry it out? Should such projects be funded by the government or by private enterprise? Who would benefit and why? etc. Then, when they are into their discussion, they should try and extend their arguments and reasoning and see where it takes them.

For example, a discussion on Atlantis might, if pre-questions have been written, lead naturally into an analysis of what we can learn from history, how and why legends arise, why archaeology of any kind is important, what things we can learn from past civilizations, how our past effects the present, etc.

In summary, this approach to discussion involves:

- A pre-discussion activity where students, either in groups or individually, write down related questions, some of which you, the teacher, can feed.

- A discussion initiated by answering such questions, and if possible drawing on students' own personal experiences.

- The logical or illogical extension of ideas brought up by the discussion.

- A round-up of conclusions involving cross-group questioning followed by whole class feedback.

- A written summary for consolidation.

The result is obviously a much fuller and productive discussion, in which you have more time to note down any recurrent mistakes, and students to let themselves go and practise their English. Nor are the

benefits solely linguistic: there is a great deal of satisfaction in having your mind stretched and producing interesting and often unexpected ideas and results.

Note: Some parts of the above were taken from the Introduction to *Discussions AZ* (CUP).

2.3. Should I encourage my students to use the typical phrases that native speakers use when having a discussion or conversation?

For a list of useful phrases, see Section 3.

In my experience, getting students to use the expressions typically taught in EFL coursebooks is an almost impossible and ultimately fruitless task. This is because they can have successful conversations without resorting to such typical phrases.

However, there are fun ways to 'force' students to use them. You can

- give each student a card with one or two phrases on it. Students have to get these phrases into the discussion at some point.

- get students to write two phrases to give to another student to use

- give prizes to the student who uses the phrases the most frequently (and appropriately)

But remember all these methods are totally artificial. If a student really needs to use such a phrase they will do so of their own accord and in a natural way. Often it is much better to focus on fluency and giving students confidence to speak, rather than obsessing with particular so-called 'useful phrases'.

Two exceptions to the above are phrases that can be used by the 'conversation manager' (see 3.1) and phrases that might help shyer students participate more by asking questions (see 2.7 and 2.9) even if they don't actually answer them.

2.4. My students are reluctant to have discussions - what can I do?

One of the simplest ways to discover why students are reluctant to talk is to ask the students themselves. Typical reasons are:

- fear of making linguistic mistakes

- lack of appropriate vocabulary and structures

- shyness and lack of confidence in general

- fear of exposing themselves and unwillingness to express possibly 'wrong' opinions; as Voltaire said: *The necessity of saying something, the embarrassment produced by the consciousness of having nothing to say, and the desire to exhibit ability, are three things sufficient to render even a great man ridiculous.*

Another reason is that students simply DON'T SEE THE BENEFIT of many speaking activities, especially group discussions. It's difficult to convince them that they are in fact learning something and that it is only by putting their ego away and experimenting and making errors that their English is going to become more fluent and hopefully more accurate.

Consequently, you need to make it clear to your students

- what the aim of a conversation / discussion lesson is (see 2.1)

- what the benefits are (see 2.1)

Not all cultures go in for discussions. A teacher of English in Kuala Lumpur, who was a reader of the original Discussions AZ (CUP), explains why discussions simply don't work with Malaysian students:

Discussion as an end in itself or as a method of practicing the language is rarely seen as either enjoyable or useful. Students are encouraged to believe that there are correct answers and solutions to all problems. The culture here also tends not to reward independence of thought, individualism or any departure from the socially accepted norms. Furthermore, it is debatable to what extent conversation is valued as part of their culture, especially conversation of a discursive nature. Generally most people here tend to take their lead from the person who has the most status in any given situation rather than work out their own thoughts on something and try to persuade others to agree.

2.5. I find certain nationalities tend to participate less in discussions than others. Why might this be?

As an example, let's take Chinese students. However, bear in mind that my observations below only apply to certain Chinese students, certainly not to all.

In traditional Chinese culture, there are some basic moral standards, such as politeness, respect, honesty, and modesty. Zhang Shou one of my PhD students explains the consequences of this:

We seldom judge others in person, and we would never criticize them. This is particularly true when subordinates are relating to their superiors. At university in China, students are expected to respect and obey the professors, it is hard for us to contradict them. In addition, Chinese people do not use many gestures or show many expressions when they talk, especially in some formal occasions.

This means that you as a teacher and also your students may initially find certain Chinese and Asian students somewhat difficult to 'read': their politeness and respect, combined with a lack of expression on their faces (or at least no expression that we in the West are able to recognize without practice), makes communication quite difficult.

The result is that such students may become rather excluded from the rest of the class, particularly during a discussion, simply because the

others don't know how to engage with them. This is even more true for Chinese students who are on their very first experience outside their country and thus may not have been able to pick up communication tips on their travels.

Chinese students have commented to me that often they began talking and within a couple of minutes the heads of their interlocutors turn their heads away. The Chinese put this down to the fact that what they are saying is not arousing the interest of their listeners, but frequently it is because their accent is strong that it completely interferes with comprehension and their interlocutor simply fails to follow them.

What can you do?

RESPECT

Explain to your students that respect comes in very different formats, but that constant politeness and agreement with what you (or their classmates) are saying may actually end up forming a barrier and a sense of distance between them and their fellow students. The whole idea of the discussion exercises in this book is for students to share ideas and question those ideas, but excessive respect and attempts at harmony are not necessarily conducive to such an outcome. So encourage them to be respectful at the beginning in their traditional way, and then suggest that they can continue in other ways (which in the west would also be signs of respect) - by participating actively in class.

ACCENT

A very strong or unfamiliar accent is a real hurdle to communication, especially when the speaker is giving little or nothing away from the expression on their face. Apart from obviously suggesting that the students should have pronunciation lessons, you can learn ways to become familiar with the kind of mistakes they make. Unfortunately we tend to bracket many Far East Asians with the same accent, so that we think that the basic difficult for the Chinese is R which they replace with L. But such aberrances rarely have a catastrophic effect on our understanding. More difficult are the unexpected ones such as the Chinese difficultly with the consonant V - the words *previous* or *advanced* say by a Chinese can be almost impossible to decipher. So a solution is to do your own research on this, and find websites that the explain the difficulties that particular nationalities have and learn to interpret or guess what they are trying to say. A good website to start you off: http://englishspeaklikenative.com/.

2.6. What kind of assumptions about my students do I need to be careful <u>not</u> to make?

In the previous section (see 2.5) I could easily be accused of stereotyping the Chinese, in fact many of my Chinese students do not fall in the category described above. They have become westernized and will participate in a discussion in the same way as, for example, a Spanish or Argentinian student might.

The examples below come from my personal experience and of course may not reflect your own experience. They are simply designed to highlight the pitfalls that we can all fall in to, even those of us who believe that we are very open-minded and worldly wise!

DON'T FALL INTO THE TRAP OF GROUPING PEOPLE OF THE SAME NATIONALITY UNDER THE SAME LABEL

My wife and I were once invited to dinner by an Iranian family - the father was an ex general in the Iranian army, the mother a teacher, and their daughter who was a student of mine. When we sat down at the table, they asked us what we would like to drink, and in an attempt to show respect we said we would have water. They promptly ordered wine for themselves. Somewhat taken aback, we mentioned the Muslim prohibition of alcohol, to which they responded that they were all atheists.

Also don't bracket people together simply on the basis that they speak the same language. For example, people from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong will not appreciate being considered a homogenous group, anymore than might the Welsh, Scottish and English.

DON'T ASSUME THAT STUDENTS ARE EXPERTS ABOUT THEIR OWN COUNTRY

I once had a very bright PhD student from Russia who seemed to share my passion for music. I asked him to recommend some good Russian music to me, imagining that he would give me the names of some indie Russian bands to investigate. Instead he came up to me the next

lesson and told me that he had discovered that Russia had some great composers: Stravinsky, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky. I was quite surprised because I had assumed that his knowledge of his country would have included the classical composers that are well known in Britain (where I come from). But in reality there is nothing different about British guests who come over to Pisa where I live and just assume that I know everything about Italy.

A key issue here is never to mock a student for their lack of knowledge about a particular topic.

DON'T ASSUME THAT PEOPLE OF ALL COUNTRIES DO THE SAME THINGS

I was doing a course on how to write CVs and we were talking about whether the pros and cons of having a section on personal interests. A student from Nepal told me that in his country the concept of hobbies didn't exist. In the same class, two students from Cameroon were quizzing their Italian classmates (I teach in Pisa, Italy) about the Italian obsession with dogs. This was their first experience outside Cameroon and they had no awareness of the West's obsession with pets.

BE OPEN TO THE FACT THAT WHAT YOU FIND INTERESTING MAY BE OF NO INTEREST TO YOUR STUDENTS AND VICE VERSA

I asked a group of my Chinese students what were some typical conversations (apart from the obvious work and family-related talk) amongst Chinese females in their late 20s and 30s are: blood groups

(i.e. which blood group one belongs to), how to deal with the mother-in-law, how to behave in someone else's house, and the generation gap between them and their parents (and grandparents) - the massive economic expansion in China has created not just a huge technological and financial gap, but also cultural gap. Maybe their parents never travelled because trains were slow and airports were few.

REMEMBER THAT NOT EVERYONE VIEWS THE WORLD IN THE SAME WAY AS YOU DO

One of my teacher interviewees told me that she had asked a group of Japanese students what they would rather do than work - none of them came up with anything because they said they would all prefer to work. The teacher had assumed that no one would prefer work over leisure.

I am well aware that the view of Japanese as only wanting to work is very stereotypical. I am pointing it out here as an example that whether a view is stereotypical or not, as a teacher you should always show that you have an open mind - you are not there to pass judgement but only to teach them English. Students should never feel that you are belittling them in some way due to the views that they hold.

2.7. What can I do with those students who talk much more than the others or tend to dominate?

One of the biggest banes of EFL teachers is having students who tend to dominate every lesson and every discussion. As soon as you realise you have a dominator in your class, you need to take action. Strategies that I have used include:

- talking to the student at the end of class and telling them that while you appreciate their enthusiasm and level of English (you need to flatter them a little!), you need them to give other students space

- the first strategy rarely works, so I then reiterate the same concept in an email, again beginning and ending my mail with positive comments about the student - the aim is to get them on board

If neither strategy works then you could ask your director of studies to intervene.

One solution for handling the dominator in a discussion is to elect him / her 'conversation manager'. Their role is NOT to express their own opinion, but to get others to express theirs, basically to act like a chairperson at a meeting. To do this effectively, the 'conversation manager' will need to learn certain phrases that can be used to intervene in the discussions - see Section 3.

2.8. How can I use pair work to ensure that less talkative students talk more, and more talkative students talk less?

Ideally everyone in the class should participate equally in a discussion. However, some students shy away from talking (let's call them 'Reluctant Speakers') because they think they don't have the skills to do so (see 2.4) or because they are shy and/or don't want to lose face. Those students who don't talk much are thus missing out on the opportunities to improve their English by speaking it.

On the other hand, there are those students are who talk too much (let's call them 'Big Talkers') and as a consequence they may be much less inclined to listen to the others.

SOLUTION 1

One solution is to put students in pairs - one big talker with one reluctant speaker. You give the Big Talker a specific role which is to keep the conversation going by asking the Reluctant Speaker a study flow of questions and by commenting very briefly on the Reluctant Speaker's answers.

This involves both students doing some preparatory work, i.e. both need to think of various questions that could be asked about the topic,. The Reluctant Speaker also needs to think about how he/she would answer the questions.

The two students can prepare the questions

- together
- or by themselves

Preparing questions together also involves them having a little discussion on the way, and the Reluctant Speaker could ensure that at least some of the questions are questions that he/she would like to answer. Preparing questions separately means that the Reluctant Speaker cannot be sure what questions will be asked and this makes the exercise more realistic.

In whatever way this exercise is conducted, the Big Talker needs to learn how to

- encourage the Reluctant Speaker to speak more (see 00)
- comment on the Reluctant Speaker's answers without taking over the discussion him/herself

SOLUTION 2

Another solution involves the Reluctant Speaker having more information available than the Big Talker . You tell the Big Talker the topic and nothing more. You tell the Reluctant Speaker the topic and give him/her the associated text and questions. The Big Talker then thinks of questions on that topic. The Reluctant Speaker reads the text, and then looks at the questions below the text and thinks of the answers. The Big Talker then asks his/her questions and should also be allowed to see the text and questions.

Both Solutions 1 and 2, entail the Reluctant Speaker having a topic that they have something to say about. Thus it makes sense early on in the course to find out what topics your students are interested in (see 1.5), particularly the topics that the Reluctant Speakers are interested in. The Big Talkers will probably be able to discuss any topic or at least more topics given their penchant for talking and their need to be more at the centre of attention.

Clearly, you don't want to tell students that you have labelled them Big Talkers and Reluctant Speakers. This means that sometimes you need to invert the roles, i.e. the Reluctant Speakers focus on asking and the Big Talkers on answering. This is worth doing in any case because the Reluctant Speakers will probably feel more relaxed in a situation where they are potentially doing less talking (thus reflecting their normal lives).

2.9. What criteria should I use to put students in pairs?

Deciding which students to pair up involves not just their general willingness to talk, but also their level of English.

Even within a class supposedly at the same level, there will still be differences. Putting a lower level Big Talker (see 2.7) with a higher level Reluctant Speaker seems the most logical solution. However, I suggest you also try out other solutions (i.e. both same level; or higher Big Talker + lower Reluctant Speaker) as some non-obvious combinations of students may work better than expected.

In any case, for each lesson it is worth creating different pairs of students. Avoid always putting the same students together and avoid always putting students of the same level together.

Another issue is that a student who thinks that he/she is good might object that their partner is of a lower level, and vice versa. So it is worth explaining that in real life, they will be speaking in English to people of all different levels. Often a student's tendency is to imagine that most of their English communication will be with native speakers, whereas in reality this is not the case.

You don't want students to think they have been labelled as 'good' or 'poor' in terms of their English. I find it helps to think of all students as having a good potential, so that your job is to help them achieve that innate potential.

To reduce the level of anxiety that students might feel in the initial lessons, you might consider letting people who already know each other form pairs. But I suggest that after a few lessons, you don't let students decide who to pair up with, as inevitably there will be some 'solo' students who will feel left out.

2.10. How should I form groups when a class is made up of different nationalities?

There are various issues to think about.

LEVEL

In the same class you may have groups of students from particular nationalities who tend to have excellent written and reading skills but poorer listening/oral skills, whereas the students from other countries

may have the reverse skills. So if you are grouping students together for a discussion you have a dilemma - do you put people of the same level of oral skills together, or do you mix them? The second option is generally better for two reasons:

- students tend to prefer to be in groups with a low percentage of students from their same language group. They have come to London, Vancouver, Melbourne or wherever you happen to be teaching not just to learn English but to feel part of a new environment that will give them an authentic experience of Europe, Canada, Australia etc. By putting them in groups of the same nationality or racial group they may get the feeling that they might as well have stayed in the home country to study

- your aim is to try and raise the level of those with weaker oral skills - by putting them with people of a higher level they should be motivated to try harder

Be aware that some nationalities might be reluctant to be paired with another nationality, not because of any racist view, but simply due to a different approach to having a discussion: *I don't work with her, she is not very good at speaking.* In such cases you can challenge the reluctant student to try and find strategies for getting the other person to speak, so that their task is to use certain useful phrases (see Section 3) that will encourage their partner to talk.

RESPECT THE STUDENTS' NORMS OF BEHAVIOUR AND EXPECTATIONS

It is wise not to force people to work in a pair with someone who in their everyday life back home they might not normally associate with. For Middle Eastern students this might include not putting two students of the opposite sex together, given that they might feel uncomfortable .

PREJUDICES

I have been told by teachers who have had classes that include Japanese and Korean students, that although in Japan there is a lot of interest in Korean soap operas and boy bands, the Koreans are considered as second class citizens (they have no voting rights in Japan). There thus might be tension between a Korean and a Japanese student.

Again in the above examples I am very wary of having given stereotypical examples. My aim is simply to help less experienced teachers feel their way in a multinational classroom. I certainly don't want to bracket entire nationalities together, and I apologize to anyone who might think that I am being rather naive or even patronising.

2.11. What should I do with students who do not want to do pair work or group work?

Some students like the teacher to be in charge the whole time, i.e. no group work or pair work. This may be because they feel that

- they need constant monitoring to correct any grammar and vocabulary mistakes they make

- their classmates are a bad model and are likely to make mistakes that no native speaker of English would make

- they want you, and only you, to be the model of how English should be spoken

If students say they don't want to do group or pair work, then your best bet is to acknowledge the three points above given that there is certainly some truth in these points. Then highlight that if you have a whole class discussion their opportunities to speak are drastically reduced. For example, supposing that the discussion lasts 60 minutes and you have a group of 12 students, then assuming that everyone talks for the same amount of time, the maximum talking time for one student would be five minutes. On the other hand, in groups of four, the talking time potentially rises to 15 minutes, in groups of three to 20 minutes, and in pairs to 30 minutes.

So you can present group work and pair work as a practical solution which maximizes their talking time.

Their reaction could then be that you won't be able to hear their mistakes. Your response to this is that:

- the objective of the discussion is not to avoid making mistakes but to improve fluency (see 2.1)
- you will go round monitoring the groups and that as a teacher you have an ability to listen in to more than one conversation at a time and are thus able to note down mistakes of more than one group at a time

If they still object that for them their primary aim of learning English is to eradicate grammar mistakes then you can suggest that they do private 1-1 lessons.

2.12. How can I boost my students' confidence? How challenging should the goals of the lesson be?

Many students consider grammatical accuracy to be the most important part of language learning. It isn't ... unless of course you are a translator, lawyer, high-level interpreter etc.

Discussions are the perfect way to boost you students' confidence. This is because students should be able to see that successfully conveying an opinion or idea doesn't depend on grammar but only being able to get the words out in a reasonably short space of time. Participants in a discussion, whether native or non-natives, are more interested in what is being said than in checking the grammatical accuracy used.

So you need to ensure that students have a clear idea of what their goal / task is.

The four tasks below (which are independent of each other, i.e. the list below is not a sequence) could be used as an introduction to a discussion on any of the topics in the AZ books.

- Brainstorm with your group to find as many different words related to the topic as you can.

- Talk together for five minutes (or whatever length of time you feel reasonable) on a particular topic without any long pauses.

- Ask your partner / group as many questions as you can about the topic within a certain time period.

- Act as the devil's advocate to whatever opinion is expressed by your partner / group.

Tasks 1-3 can be set before handing out photocopies of the exercise. Task 4 could be used when students are actually discussing a topic.

Apart from the first goal above, the others are not specifically language related. They don't depend on your students' accurate use of grammar.

The key is to make the goals as achievable as possible. Some teachers like to constantly challenge their students in terms of getting them to really stretch themselves. This may be fine with students who like to be challenged, but not all do. Remember that although the English language is what your job revolves around, for them English is likely to be a means to an end and they may prefer challenges to be related only to their job or studies.

By setting achievable goals you will automatically lower your students' level of anxiety. You are also showing your students that you want to provide them with a supportive non-threatening atmosphere.

Other ways to create a non-threatening atmosphere are:

- ensuring that all students respect each other - this means setting ground rules (see 1.6) about what is and is not acceptable classroom behaviour

- choosing topics that you are fairly sure students will feel relaxed talking about (see 1.4 and 1.5)

- ensuring that all students have understood the task that you are asking them to do - this also means making it clear from the first lesson that it is completely normal for students not to be totally clear about what they have to do. They should thus feel free to check either with you or a fellow student without any fear of embarrassment

- not making a student feel stupid by showing up their lack of knowledge about a particular topic (i.e. knowledge that has nothing to do with learning English)

- not correcting students on the spot but allocating a slot in the lesson where you analyse mistakes without mentioning who made them

- not showing up a student by calling them at random when they clearly have not been concentrating or even worse when they are deliberately avoiding eye contact with you because they don't want to be called on

2.13. Many students seem not to listen when others in the group are talking, why?

When I assess new students in order to allocate them to a class, I quite often do two or three students at a time. These students have never met each other, although they may work in the same company or research institute. What typically happens is that I spend around 30-60 seconds talking to one student, and then I turn to the next for another short burst of questions. What never ceases to amaze me is that the students who are not being asked questions tend to show zero interest in the student being questioned, instead they pick their fingers or stare vaguely into the distance. But why? Surely they would be interested in listening to someone who might well be in the same English group as them.

There are several possible answers:

- It could simply be that the talker is boring, doesn't express themself clearly, or has a very halting English. However, I find that this rarely the real issue.

- It may be a leftover from their high school experience when they only concentrated when the teacher was either saying something to the whole class or to them personally. But when someone else was being questioned, they turned off. And this habit has persisted into adulthood.

But for me the real answers are much more serious:

- Schools don't teach kids 'how' (or why) to listen.
- A lot of people are simply not curious about each other or use the excuse that it is none of their business. People live in bubbles.

So how can you get your students to actually <u>want</u> to listen to each other? Read on ...

2.14. How do I get my students to listen to each other?

To have a successful discussion everyone needs to listen to each other.

To encourage everyone to listen, you need to get students to constantly ask each other questions. One way to do this is to allow students only to talk for 10-20 seconds at a time. After this time lapse another student has to do one of the following:

- ask the talker a question a related question
- ask another student to express their opinion about what the talker has just said
- make a comment themself

Alternatively the talker has to stop after 30 seconds and pass the question to someone else.

You can tell the students that there is a massive benefit to this strategy:

- by having to ask questions and make comments they will obviously be forced to listen to what the other person is saying

- their listening skills will improve as they will be training themselves for situations when they really do need to listen (e.g. work meetings, listening tests, movies)

- their grammar skills will improve given that questions generally require a different word order and different tenses will often be needed. This fact may be very motivating for those students who feel that discussions are a waste of time and think that grammar is the be all and end all of language learning

The overall discussion too will benefit from everyone being involved.

2.15. Why don't students seem to like asking questions during a discussion but instead only 'announce' their own point of view?

If you have contact with young children you will be familiar with the kinds of questions they ask:

Why do dogs bark?

Why do I have to eat my spinach?

Why is the sky blue?

Why do I have to go to bed early and you always stay up late?

Why do I have to learn to read?

Why?

Children see the soil, the land, the earth and the universe in a different way from a typical adult. They question everything. Everything is new. Their eyes, too, are new. They are not dimmed by experience. They are much closer to the ground. They literally sees many more things than we do - ants walking along, pieces of chewing gum stuck to the road, the contorted veins of squashed leaves. Jimi Hendrix once described a good musician *is like a child who hasn't been handled too many times by man, hasn't had too many fingerprints across his brain.*

A child's mind too is uncluttered, or relatively so. They haven't reached too many conclusions. They don't try to pigeon-hole new experiences. They're open to them and willing to test them out (but not new food - some patterns have already been formed!). Up to the age of five or six they are more than happy to take intellectual chances. They know they're not going to be judged and they're not too adverse to criticism of their hypotheses.

By the time they reach adolescence though, much of their inquisitiveness, open-mindedness and lack of inhibitions will have slowly and systematically given way to a set of fairly fixed ideas or models onto which they will try to map all future experiences And by the time they're an adult they will probably have stopped asking 'why?' and 'if'. Either because they think they know the answer, or because they're not interested in knowing the answer, or simply because they've lost the habit of wanting to know more.

From that point on we seem to pick up ideas from here and there (parents, social media, friends, movies, textbooks and novels) and spout them out when appropriate without any conscious processing.

Instead of looking at reality and drawing conclusions, we tend to build reality on the basis of conclusions we may have reached years before (and not even be aware of).

Think back to how you were taught at school.

Many of us were constantly given answers to questions we never asked or never even thought to ask. We were not encouraged to ask questions. We became overly dependent on our teachers and were unable to assess our own abilities. Our minds thus became hard, dulled, shrunken.

But asking questions and firing out hypotheses is essential. If people didn't continually ask new questions and pose new hypotheses then there would be no progress in science, education, in the history of thought ...

There is a solution.

Imagine how it might be, if, as suggested by Richard Paul of The Center for Critical Thinking in Santa Rosa, California, if instead of testing students by getting them to write answers in exam situations, they had to invent questions.

Questions define tasks, express problems and delineate issues. Answers on the other hand, often signal a full stop in thought. Only when an answer generates a further question does thought continue its life as such. This is why it is true that only students who have questions are really thinking and learning. It is possible to give students an examination on any subject just by asking them to list all of the questions that they have about a subject, including all questions generated by their first list of questions.

The fact that most people have lost the ability to ask questions can be illustrated with a simple example. Many of you will have had to do private one-to-one lessons. If such lessons are based primarily on conversation you will probably have developed the skills of a good interviewer. This means that you are always at least one step, if not two, ahead of your student. You know where the conversation is going and you're ready with questions to fire if the student looks as if they're coming to an end of what they're saying. At the beginning of your teaching career it's not that easy to have so many questions up your sleeve. But with a bit of practice the questions seem to come to you naturally and you amaze yourself with your own questioning resourcefulness.

But have you ever tried to reverse the process - they ask you the questions? It is surprising how even the most well-educated and linguistically-fluent student will go into utter panic when faced with the simple task of asking you questions. Even with such a vast (and fascinating!) topic as your life story, students will probably exhaust their questioning power after as few as four or five questions.

People (apart from those in particular professions - journalists, personnel managers, psychologists, marriage guidance agencies, talk show hosts etc) are simply not used to asking questions. They just don't know how. Nor are they used to being asked questions.

And since we have lost our sense of intellectual adventure and curiosity, and since we are never confronted with the discovery of wonder, we no longer challenge ourselves or each other.

Our students for too long have been content to have information and ideas funnelled straight through a hole into their heads, and we teachers have been just as content to do the funnelling. The only filtering students have had to do is to subconsciously decide which item of information goes into which pre-existing belief system or mind set, distorting and simplifying such information to get the easiest fit possible.

It is only by having a new approach to discussions in class and having a really open minds that we and our students are going to be able to have really rewarding discussions. And these discussions will be a means to an end: to learn to speak good English.

This lack of critical thinking may be even more pronounced in some Asian countries. One of my teacher interviewees told me that:

The students who have gone through the Korean education system generally have no experience expressing opinions and taking part in open discussions. Their language use may be relatively high, but discussion / critical skills seem not to be taught here in the high schools. My Korean students are very intelligent, but they've just never really had someone say: "What do you think?" - their critical thinking skills are not well developed. However they do open up as time goes by and I sometimes get comments in my feedback that the English class was their favorite because they could express themselves with their peers. Some even pointed out (realized) that it was the first time they'd ever done that.

2.16. What issues / difficulties / awkward moments might I encounter with certain students when the discussion is about a controversial topic?

Below is a dialogue from a class in Vancouver, Canada.

> Teacher to a group of students from the same country: *How are homosexuals treated in your country?*
>
> Student 1: *We don't have homosexuals in our country.*
>
> Teacher: *Is it possible that they exist, but they don't feel comfortable to come out?*
>
> Student 2: *No, we don't have them.*

The class in question was learning academic English. The teacher was trying to integrate a discussion on homosexuality with the skill that her coursebook had instructed her to teach: argumentative language. I would like to draw out four points from the above.

- Tempting as it may be, your job as a teacher is not to try and convert your students to your way of thinking. I would say that it is, however, totally legitimate to raise their awareness - but only in reasonably subtle ways.

- Although in your normal life you may enjoy taking people outside their comfort zone by challenging their opinions, with students of certain nationalities this is simply not a good idea.

- As a teacher you are representing your school, and your school's reputation also depends on how / what you teach. You don't want your students to leave the lesson thinking that their teacher is a crazy person with strange or even unacceptable ideas. This may impact on how they describe your school to their compatriots back home who may then think twice about enrolling.

- If you do wish to express your views, but indirectly, then opt for the devil's advocate role by saying: *Some people would say that your country does have homosexuals but that ...*

In any case, don't let one 'bad' reaction by students of a certain nationality put you off doing the 'controversial' exercises. A teacher from a university in Korea told me this about the 'controversial' topics contained in some of my books:

Though many of my students are from the Korean education system and are a bit challenged by the controversial topics at first, some other students have gone to international schools and love that type of thing. The more controversial topics, if mixed in with some of the more 'mainstream' ones, seem to motivate students and keep their interest high. And once the other students see that it's OK to discuss such topics. In fact, they really get into it since for many of them it's the first time in their education that they've been asked to truly express themselves. Personally, I really like using such topics in my classes.

2.17. As a teacher what non-language questions might I be asked during a class discussion? How should I deal with them?

Apart from standard questions about your nationality, and occupation, your city / town, period of stay in their country, some nationalities might ask you about your marital status, whether you have children or not, your age, and your salary. Clearly, none of these types of questions are difficult to answer. However, there may be some lines of questioning that might appear to be provocative or which will raise doubts in your mind as to whether you should defend your compatriots or express a personal opinion, or simply avoid the question.

In the various *Discussions* books there are several exercises regarding US culture. If you are from the US, then students might find it interesting to ask you for your take on life in the USA. Some of the questions you are asked may implicitly be critical, for example the following:

1. Why is there so much homelessness in San Francisco and Los Angeles? In this day and age, how is it possible to find such wealth and poverty living side by side?

2. What battle in your opinion marked the turning point in the American war of independence?

3. Why is New York so violent?

4. Why do your newspapers contain so little international news but so much scandal?

5. Apparently many Americans never travel abroad and can't even recognize their own country on a map of the world? Is this true?

The key factor to remember here is that the questioner assumes that you, being an American, must know everything about the country's history, geography, politics etc. I live in Italy, and when I have guests from the UK, they expect me to know the entire history of Italian art, all the names of plants and different types of bread, exactly how wine is made and all the different varieties, and a whole load of things that they would certainly not know about the UK.

I asked one American whether she found it irritating when people say the US is very insular. Her answer shows the level of frustration that many people who travel have experienced:

If you are being hosted in a country and somebody asks you one of these questions, you can't respond too truthfully because you're a guest. But at the same time, they are saying Americans never go anywhere and you're sitting in their front room and have a full passport with stamps from twelve different countries, and you can even read the Chinese characters on their tea set. So you want to say: well most of us who have passports have been to university and ...

Ways of dealing with 'difficult' questions are (the numbers refer to the five questions above):

(1) Revert the question back: *I don't really have the answer to that question. Do you have a problem with homelessness in your country?*

(2) Say you are not an expert in that field, and again revert question: *When did your country become independent?* Or make a related comment: *If I am not wrong, your country was once a French colony, right?*

(3) Politely put the questioner right but acknowledge that on some level they do have a point: *Actually, New York is really quite safe now. But you're right, it was quite dangerous at some point.*

(4, 5) Avoid confrontation by i) asking the questioner what they think the answer is to their own question; ii) making some kind of generalization or expressing some kind of agreement: *I think a lot of people presume that that is the case. Yes, we do have a reputation for being a bit self-focused.*

The secret is not to take questions (particularly unfair accusations) too personally. Don't feel that you are an ambassador of your country and therefore have to defend the homeland. Most cultures appreciate harmony being maintained, so in the classroom there is no point in feeling that you have to correct someone's misguided opinions.

2.18. Why and how should I monitor my students?

The problem with most discussion exercises is that their apparent free format means that students feel that i) they are not learning anything, and ii) they are not being checked. Students should be aware of:

- what is going to be happening in the lessons and what they should be striving to achieve
- how they are going to be assessed

This will depend on the lesson you are giving, but some general points can be made.

Discussion exercises are designed primarily to give students an opportunity to practise fluency. Students must understand that accuracy is <u>not</u> the main target. If they are too worried about accuracy their speech will be very haltering. The secondary aim is to put the vocabulary they have learned about a particular topic into some kind of context. My premise is that students can grapple with complex ideas and that students must be actively engaged to learn. They should be able to learn without realising that they are learning, and stimulating discussions are a good way of achieving this.

Students must feel that they are being monitored during their discussions. This does not mean interrupting them when they make a mistake, but simply you noting down any significant or recurrent mistakes (grammar, vocabulary etc) that are made. Such mistakes can then be analysed at another point during the current lesson or at the

beginning of the next. The only exceptions I would make are i) pronunciation mistakes, if a word is being consistently mispronounced it's generally a good idea to intervene; and ii) any mistakes that may be impeding comprehension or simply annoying other students (or yourself!).

Given the nature of free-speaking activities, it is always wise you to go round the groups in order to:

- Note down any recurrent errors. These will then be discussed at the error-correction stage, or dictated for homework analysis. From the students' point of view this is important because although they are very free to speak, they still feel the need to be 'guided', rather than talking just for the sake of it. I would advise you not to interrupt students during this stage, as this promotes inhibition and impedes fluency.

- Make sure that no one student is dominating the discussion. More reticent students should be encouraged to speak, and the domineering student invited, implicitly or explicitly, to restrain him/herself.

- Feed, if necessary, discussions which are dying out, by giving another angle to discuss, or alternatively another question to consider.

In relation to Point 3, it is a good idea to tell students to discuss, say, only the first five of ten questions. This means that those who finish their discussion quickly can be asked to move on to the next questions, whilst the more loquacious groups are given enough time

to finish their debates. It's important that students feel they have achieved the task they've been set.

2.19. What do I need to think about after students have had their discussion?

Below are some questions that are worth asking yourself at the end of the lesson.

- What useful phrases were they missing? What phrases should I introduce for my next conversation lesson with this group?

- How and to what extent did they show interest in the topic? How far did they take the topic? What can I do next time (with another group) to make the discussion more effective?

- How many topics did they discuss and why?

- Did they listen or were they more intent on expressing their opinion?

- Did one person dominate? Why? Were they dominating or taking responsibility?

Section 3: Useful phrases

Below are phrases that you might like your students to use during discussions (but see 2.3). You can photocopy these phrases and give them to the students to study / use.

I suggest that students learn just one or two phrases from each section. Their criteria for choosing them should be based on:

- how often they think they might use an expression

- how easy the expression is to remember - for example, because it is similar to a phrase in the student's own language

- how easy the expression is to pronounce (in the sense of pronunciation, stress, intonation) correctly

3.1. CONVERSATION MANAGER

3.1.1. Asking everyone's opinion

Do you all agree on that?

Does anyone have any comments?

What do you think about XXX?

What are your feelings about XXX?

What are your views on this?

What's your opinion?

How do you see this?

3.1.2. Asking for a specific person's opinion

Kamran – what do you think about ….?

Vi-Do, would you like to comment here?

Fritz, what about you?

Dhinesh, can I just bring you in here?

Asking for reactions

Any reaction to that?

What's your reaction to that?

Has anybody any strong feelings about that?

Has anybody any comments to make?

3.2. EXPRESSING (DIS)AGREEMENT

3.2.1. Agreeing

I'm in complete agreement.

I couldn't agree more.

I (quite) agree.

Right.

You're right there.

I think you're right.

Yes, definitely.

Exactly!

Precisely!

3.2.2. Polite but strong rejection

I'm afraid I can't accept that.

I'm sorry, but that's not really practical.

I'm afraid I'm not very happy about that.

I'm sorry, but I have reservations about that.

I really think we should concentrate on X. I don't want to put it in the background.

I don't want to force the issue more than necessary, but ...

I suppose so, but I still think ...

Actually, I'm not sure that that is necessarily the best approach.

3.2.3. Diplomatic disagreement

I see what you mean, but ...

You've got a point, but ...

I take/see your point but ...

I appreciate what he's saying but ...

I appreciate your point of view but ...

You may be right, but personally I ...

I'm not sure whether that's feasible.

I don't want to sound discouraging but ...

I accept the need for x but ...

I can see why you want to do this but ...

OK, but what if ...?

Yes, but have you thought about ...?

3.3. MANAGING A CONVERSATION

3.3.1. Showing interest

Oh, are you?

Oh, is it?

Oh, really?

Right.

That's interesting.

Oh, I hadn't realized.

3.3.2. Picking up on what someone else has said

On that subject, I think ...

As far as xxx is concerned I think ...

Regarding xxx, I think ...

While we're on that subject, I think ...

3.3.3. Interrupting your interlocutor

Excuse me for interrupting.

May I come in here?

I'd like to comment on that.

If I could just interrupt you ...

OK, but listen ...

Sorry, could I just interrupt?

Sorry do you mind if I just say something?

Sorry do you mind if I just ask Luigi a question?

We're talking at cross purposes.

3.3.4. Questioning relevancy of what someone has just said

That's not really the point.

I'm not sure that's really relevant.

I'm not sure what that's got to do with it.

3.3.5. What to say when someone interrupts you

Sorry, just a sec ...

OK, I've nearly finished ...

Sorry, if I could just finish what I'm saying ...

Can I just finish what I was saying? It will only take me a minute.

Sorry, just one more thing, ...

Sorry, can I just say / add something.

I would just like to add that ...

3.3.6. Returning to what you were just saying before an interruption

As I was saying ...

Going back to what I was saying / I said before ...

Let's just go back a bit to what we were saying before.

Can I just go back ...

Let's get back to the point.

I think we're losing sight of the main point.

3.3.7. Returning to main point after an interruption (e.g. a phone call)

OK, where was I? / What was I going to say?

OK, what we were saying? Oh, yes, I was saying that ...

3.3.8. Beginning a parenthesis

By the way, did you know that Silvia is ...

By the way, I forgot to tell you that ...

On a completely different subject ...

If I could just change the subject a second ...

3.3.9. Underlining your main point

What I'm trying to say is ...

The point I'm trying to make is ...

Basically what I'm saying is ...

The thing is ...

To cut a long story short ...

All I'm saying is ...

3.3.10. Pausing for time

I mean. Well. Right. Um. Er. You know.

Could we come back to that later?

Now where was I?

Sorry, I'll just have to think about that a sec.

Sorry, I've forgotten what I was going to say.

3.4. CHECKING UNDERSTANDING

3.4.1. Asking the speaker to change their way of speaking

Sorry, could you speak up please?

Sorry, could you speak more slowly please?

3.4.2. Asking for repetition of the whole phrase

I'm sorry what did you say?

Could you explain that again using different words?

Sorry, could you say that again?

Sorry, I didn't catch that.

Sorry what was your question?

3.4.3. Identifying the part of the phrase that you did not understand

Sorry, what did you say at the beginning?

I didn't get the middle / last bit.

Sorry what was the last bit?

Could you say that last bit again?

Sorry I missed the bit about ...

And you did what sorry?

And you went where sorry?

You spoke to who sorry?

3.4.5. Repeating the part of the phrase up to the point where you stopped understanding

Sorry, you think that xxx is important but ... ?

And then you went to ... ?

And the food was ...?

3.4.6. When the speaker has repeated what they said but you still cannot understand

Sorry, I still don't understand.

Sorry, do you think you could say that in another way?

Sorry, could you that again but much more slowly?

Sorry, could you write that word down, I can't really understand it.

3.4.7. When you understand the words but not the general sense

Sorry, I'm not really clear what you're saying.

Sorry I think I have missed the point.

Sorry but I am not really clear about ...

3.4.8. When you didn't hear because you were distracted

Sorry, I missed that last part.

Sorry, I got distracted. What were you saying?

Sorry, I've lost track of what you were saying.

Sorry, I've forgotten the first point you made.

Sorry, I'm a bit lost.

Sorry I wasn't concentrating, what were you saying?

3.4.9. Clarifying by summarizing what other person has said

So what you're saying is …

So you're saying that it *is* true.

So if I understood you correctly, you mean …

Let me see if I have the big picture. You're saying that …

3.4.10. Clarifying what you have said

What I said / meant was …

What I'm trying to say is …

The point I'm making is …

Let me say that in another way.

In other words, what I mean is …

3.4.11. Clarifying a misunderstanding in what you said

No, that's not really what I meant.

No, actually what I meant was …

Well, not exactly.

What I was trying to say was …

That's not actually what I was trying to say.

3.4.12. Clarifying a misunderstanding regarding what a third party has said

I think you may have misunderstood what he said. What he meant was ...

No, I think what he was trying to say was ... Have I got that right?

If I'm not mistaken, what she was saying was:

3.4.13. Checking that others are following you

Does that make sense to you?

Do you understand what I mean?

Am I making myself clear?

Are you with me?

Do you see what I mean?

Are you following me?

Does that seem to make sense (to you)?

Do you understand what I'm saying?

3.4.14. Saying that you are following what someone is saying

Yes, I see what you're getting at.

Yes, perfectly.

Yes, I know what you are saying ...

Yeah, yeah, yeah - I've got you.

I'm with you.

OK, I think it's clear what you are saying.

3.4.15. Checking you have understood

Let me check that I've understood.

I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying that ...?

Before you go on, do you mean that?

It is still not clear to me. What do I do when..?

Let me check that I've understood.

I'm not sure I understand. Are you saying that ...?

Sorry but I am not really clear about ...

Sorry I wasn't concentrating / got distracted / was daydreaming, what were you saying?

3.4.15. Asking for clarification by repeating what they've said

Before we go on let me paraphrase what I think you are saying.

Let me restate your last point to see if I understand.

So what you're saying is ...

So if I understood you correctly, you mean ...

3.4.16. Confirming that you understand

Yes, I see what you're getting at.

Yes and no, it seems a bit of a contradiction to me.

I go along with you when you say X, but not with Y

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tefldiscussion.com/teaching-tips