

Improv! Helping students cope with the spontaneity of real life

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The games we played and why we played them:

1. Passing game

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

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

Rationale

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

2. The three-headed expert

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

Rationale

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

3. The world's most amazing party

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

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

Rationale

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

4. Random Interactions

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

Can you reach that for me please?

Watch out! Someone's dropped some eggs?

Have you got the time please?

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rationale

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

Have fun!!

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

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