
Communicative Grammar and Vocabulary Practice with No Preparation*

(*well very little anyway...)

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The activities described below are from among my personal favourites, and are all tried and tested. They can all be used to practise almost any language point, take little preparation and involve varying amounts of personalisation, creativity and competition. Their origin in most cases is uncertain, and are the results of attending many conferences as well as spending hours sharing ideas with colleagues over the years. Enjoy...

Random Answers

Dictate a series of questions to the group; each individual writes SHORT answers in random order on a piece of paper. Then in pairs, each student looks at their partner's sheet of paper and asks questions to find out the significance of each short answer that is written there. Eg: '*last week...* is that the last time you wrote an e-mail?'. This activity gives students a reason to listen to each other, and depending on the level, can develop into an extended fluency activity as well as practising the target language, in the example shown this being past simple and time expressions.

Memory

Take six lexical expressions, and split each into two halves. (eg: Just a / moment, Sorry / I can't, etc) Put each half on a separate slip of paper, and number them randomly from 1-12. Next, draw a grid with twelve squares on the board, and in teams, the class have to take turns to give two numbers. After each guess, the teacher puts the sentence halves that correspond to the two numbers the students gave into the relevant numbered squares on the board. The aim is for the teams to find the corresponding pairs. A competitive and fun team activity, works with any two part structures and saves a lot of time over preparing individual sets of memory cards.

3 true; 1 false

Each student writes 4 sentences about themselves, 1 of which is false. They read their sentences to a partner who must guess which one is false. Gives learners a reason to listen to each other, and can be tailored to practice any grammar or vocabulary area.

Challenges

A fun and highly personalised activity – tell students they have broken their right arm (if right handed; left arm if left handed) Set a series of challenges as an example, for instance making a paper plane, writing their name. Students then set each other challenges and write up the results. Eg 'Anna can tie her shoelaces with one hand, but she can't make a paper plane', etc. Works well with teenagers especially and practices can / could for ability.

Total Recall – Dictate 10 word definitions to the class. Ss must not write, but try to memorise the words being defined. After the tenth definition, give ss one minute in pairs to write as many words as they can remember. Ss can then repeat the activity in pairs / groups making their own definitions. Good for recycling of any vocab; also good for practice of relative pronouns.

Spot the similarity – Ss each draw a picture consisting of their choice of a number of objects dictated by the teacher. They then talk to a partner about their pictures without showing them, and score points for similarities. Can be used to practice prepositions of place, quantifiers, etc. Personalised and achieves the same aim as 'spot the difference' activities – for which you might have to search for suitable material.

Blockbusters – Based on a British TV quiz programme. Draw a grid of hexagons 5X5 on the board; number the hexagons 1-25. Shade the top and bottom of the board red, and the left and right blue. Divide the class into two teams – red and blue. To play the game, ask questions alternately to each team. For a correct answer, a hexagon is shaded in the respective team's colour. The aim is for the red team to create an unbroken chain of red hexagons from top to bottom of the board; the blue team a chain of blue hexagons from right to left. Each must try to block the

other, and the first team to create an unbroken chain is the winner. Can be used to recycle any vocabulary or structure.

Categories – Draw a grid on the board with four category headings – eg ‘An animal, a colour, a food item, something in the classroom’. Divide the class into pairs or groups, and give the whole class an alphabet letter. Each team works together to write down an item for each category beginning with the given letter; the first team to write four items shouts ‘stop’. If the four items are valid, they win a point. Can be adapted in many ways – eg words containing certain sounds, lexical sets, etc.

Clap Hands – a fun kinaesthetic / TPR activity. Students sit facing each other in pairs with their right hand raised opposite their partners hand (but not touching). Each student in the pair is assigned a word – eg ship / sheep. When the teacher says ‘ship’, the student whose word this is must try to clap hands with their partner; the partner must try to move their hand out of the way. Other word pairs could be ‘single letter / double letter’, ‘true / false’, allowing the activity the flexibility to practise word recognition, spelling, meaning, etc.

Guess the collocation – Think of a word and 5 or 6 words that collocate with it. (eg technology: new, outdated, the latest, computer, information...) Reveal the words that collocate one at a time, and get the class to guess which word they all collocate with. The more clues, the fewer points they win. Students can easily make their own sets at home, which can be used a class warmer. Good for recycling known language, and can also generate new collocations – could be used in tandem with a dictionary to check suggestions that students may be unsure of.

What’s changed?

Get students to work in pairs. In one minute, they must study their partner’s appearance and try to remember as much as they can. Back to back, they then change three things about their appearance. Then they try to spot what’s changed. Good for present perfect (present result of past action).

Bingo

An old favourite – but to add to the level of challenge, get students to write infinitives and the teacher calls past simple forms, etc. A further adaptation is for the students to be nominated in turn to call the words. Students cross off the corresponding words as they are called. The winner can be the first to cross off a line, or for a longer game, a ‘full house’.

Defining Race

In pairs, students go back through their vocab books and write down words they have learned – one per slip of paper. The teacher collects the slips and puts them all together. Divide the class into teams, each with a ‘runner’, and the runner takes a slip of paper from the pile, takes it back to their team and defines it. When the team guesses the word correctly, they keep the slip of paper and the runner returns for another slip, and so on until all the slips are used. It’s a good idea to change the runners from time to time, and the winning team is the one with the most slips of paper correctly guessed.

Find someone who... (a variation)

Get students to write three true sentences about themselves in the affirmative on three separate slips of paper. The teacher collects them in. Students then stand and take one slip of paper from the pile at a time. They transform the statement into a question and mingle, asking the question to try and find who wrote the statement. When they get an affirmative answer, they ask the follow up question ‘Did you write this?’. If the answer again is yes, they pocket the slip and take another one, repeating the procedure until all the slips are used up. The person with the most slips could be declared the winner. Can be used to practise any structure whatsoever.

Hotseat

Another old favourite. Divide the class into teams, and get one student from each team to sit facing their team but with their backs to the board. The teacher writes a word on the board, and the teams have to define the word to their person in the hotseat. The person who gives the correct word first is the winner.