

Speaking in the Onion Game

Totally unexpectedly, you are asked to join your class to another because a teacher has called in sick at the last moment. Recognise the situation? Well, here's an activity that I often use to get me out of this tricky spot, and, an added bonus, the students usually like it too!

First of all clarify that the class are going to be engaged in a speaking activity in which they will be able to develop fluency. They will also be able to compare their speaking fluency level with that of another class.

Put the two classes together. Ask them to introduce themselves to each other – as a task objective ask them to try and memorise the names of everybody in the room. Let them mill about as they do this. Then conduct a round-up.

Next, organise the chairs in two concentric circles. The chairs in the inner circle should face outwards, and the chairs in the outer circle should face inwards. Each chair in the inner circle should be facing a chair in the outer circle. (The name of this activity is derived from this seating arrangement, which resembles layers of onion. No? Oh, well, never mind!)

Ask students from class A to sit in the inner circle facing somebody from class B sitting on one of the chairs in the outer circle. Modify this according to the numbers in the respective classes. Now write a topic on the board and students interview their opposite partner about this topic. A suggested list of topics can be found at the end of this piece.

At a pre-arranged signal from you (eg raise your hand, play a note on a musical instrument, play some music on a tape), the students in the outer circle all stand up and move one seat to their left. They sit down, say hello to their new partner, and begin to chat about the second topic on the board. They go on doing this until they hear/notice the stop signal again. The students in the outer circle get up again, and again move one seat to their left, where they meet a new partner and discuss another topic.

Go on with the activity for as long as you feel that students are getting a buzz out of it. You might like to follow it up by writing up on the board some useful expressions students have used and which the whole class might like to share. This can then be followed by writing up on the board some

examples of inaccurate language that have been used, and inviting students to sit with somebody who is not in their class and to work on correcting these mistakes collaboratively. Finally, you might like to ask for feedback regarding what students thought of the activity, and this may well lead into a discussion about the need to seek opportunities to develop speaking fluency outside the classroom. I remember one group of four students who met regularly after classes every day to go on with the activity (they chose their own topics) and would come to class each morning with a list of questions that sprang out of their 'chat group' e.g. 'How can I say ... in English?' or 'Is this right in English?'

By the way, the activity can generate quite a hubbub, so just check with teachers in adjacent rooms that you won't be disturbing their classes.

Here are some topics:

Elementary upwards: My best friend / My house / My town / Last weekend / What I like and don't like about Malta / What I like and don't like about my language course / Find out as much as you can about the person facing you etc. etc.

Pre-Intermediate upwards: As elementary plus: My first boyfriend/girlfriend / A book/film/person that has really influenced me/ A wonderful experience / A wonderful/disastrous holiday / Three wishes for myself / Three regrets I have / The job I would really love to do / What's wrong with the world / The three most urgent problems in the world/my country / What my country could teach Malta and what my country could learn from Malta / My favourite book/film/TV programme/sports personality etc. etc.

I'm sure you can think up many more! Enjoy yourself!

Alan Marsh