

Teaching Conversation Skills With Content Based Materials

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With a little imagination, teachers can create fun lessons that integrate conversation skills and tasks with various content no matter what the content is and what level the class is. Through trial, error, and determination, I have found that many of the basic conversation games and activities that EFL teachers use can be adapted to fit the needs of content courses. Basically, it is a matter of slipping content into activities commonly used in conversation classes.

The "Find Someone Who..." activity is very easy to slip content into. In an art college where I taught English for art I used this activity, and in an environmental studies class I have also used this activity. In an English for Art class, which I taught for foreign students in America, I gave each student a small card with information such as the following:

- Your name is Dali. You are a surrealist. I also attached a small picture of one of his works.
- Your name is Ansel Adams. You are a famous black and white landscape photographer. I included a small picture of his.

All students received this handout:

Find Someone Who... Write the names of the artists below.

1. is a surrealist _____
2. is a sculptor _____
3. is a landscape photographer _____
4. is a modernist _____

This was followed up by a discussion activity in which students talked about their favorite types of art and artists. They also expressed their opinions about the pictures.

My environmental studies class concentrates on using environmental content and issues as a spring board for improving communication skills. I recently wanted my students to understand and communicate about endangered species, and I found the "Find Someone Who..." activity very useful. In this class, after preteaching necessary vocabulary, I gave each student a card such as the following:

- You are an African elephant. You are endangered because of habitat destruction and poaching for your ivory. I also attached a picture.
- You are an Atlantic bluefin tuna. You are endangered because of overfishing. I also attached a picture.

Students received a handout like the one below:

Find Someone Who is... Write the name of the endangered species below.

1. endangered because of poaching for fur _____
2. endangered because of poaching for ivory _____
3. endangered because of overfishing _____
4. endangered because of habitat destruction _____

Various types of content can be used with the speaking game normally referred to as "20 Questions." In my environmental studies class my students have played this to practice using vocabulary related to animal classification. Students asked questions such as

below:

- Are you a mammal?
- Do you have sharp teeth?
- Are you a carnivore?
- Are you a tiger?

In a mass media based EFL class, my students played "20 Questions" to help them remember vocabulary related to various types of media and media related occupations. Each student pretended to have a job in the media. Example questions were:

- Do you work in the print media?
- Do you work in the electronic media?
- Do you appear on television?
- Do you report news?
- Are you a sports reporter?
- Are you an entertainment reporter?

Jig saw activities offer opportunities for mixing content of any type with English conversation skills. Jig saw activities can be made for teaching all aspects of conversation. With the jig saw activity described below, I concentrated on listening and speaking skills.

For the environmental studies class, I cut pictures out of a nature magazine. One set of pictures was about scientists trying to restore bald eagles to states in America where they no longer live. The other was about marine biologists trying to preserve habitat for sea horses. Then, using the pictures, I made a poster for each story. The posters were put at opposite ends of the class. Along with each poster, I placed a cassette player with a tape recording, which explained the pictures. Using vocabulary which I felt most of the students knew, I recorded the stories of the pictures, and I added a few relevant words. I pretaught the new vocabulary to the whole class, and then divided the class into the eagle and sea horse group and assigned each student a partner who was with the other group. Then, I explained that half of the class would listen to one tape while taking notes, so that they could explain the pictures and story to their partner with the other half of class. Students could play the tape over and over again. They could stop it when they wanted. I informed them that at the end of class we would play a game, using the information from the posters and cassette tapes.

I let the students go to their pictures. They listened and wrote notes. I observed the class and at the point when they appeared to be finished with note taking, I told each student in the eagle group to pair off with their sea horse group partner and explain the eagle poster. Next, the sea horse group explained the sea horse poster. After this, I had the class return to their seats with the partners sitting together. Each pair was assigned a number. I read questions about the poster stories aloud. The first pair to correctly answer the questions received a point. Within each pair, sea horse group students could only answer questions about the eagle picture. Eagle group students could only answer questions about the sea horse story. They could explain the answer to their partner, but their partner would have to announce the correct answer to me. The pair with the most correct answers received a small prize.

These are three examples of mixing content with conversation activities. If you are not teaching a content based course, but are interested in these ideas, I suggest you do a survey of your class to find out what interests your students. Then, combine the topics they like with your conversation class activities. Most of my students in Japan respond that they want to communicate and learn about music, travel, and foreign cultures. I have found that students respond favorably to English lessons in which I have integrated their content choices.