



# Cambridge English

# Teacher Development

## Keeping learners interested

### Find an interesting topic

Often your topic will be prescribed by whatever course materials you are using. Otherwise, you need to find interesting topics of your own. These do not necessarily have to be relevant to learners' own lives. Nor do they necessarily have to be based on new information: I've often been surprised how interested learners are in texts that deal with things they know a lot about. Note, however, that a topic is only usually good for stimulating learners' interest at the beginning of an activity: they will continue to be interested only if the following task is stimulating – see tips below.

### Keep it short

Activities within the lesson should not be too long. Obviously, the exact length depends on the age and concentration span of the learners, but in my experience even adult, highly motivated academic learners tend to get bored with procedures that last longer than half an hour, and younger, less motivated ones need much shorter ones. Probably between 10 and 20 minutes per activity is about right for most classes, but there are many shorter ones that can be used between the main procedures or to begin or end a lesson.

### Vary

It's important to have activities within the lesson that are not only short, but also differ in various aspects: whether they involve listening, speaking, reading or writing (or combinations of these); whether they are based on teacher-fronted, individual, or group work; whether they involve active, outgoing interaction or quieter, reflective engagement with the language; whether they are fast-moving or slow; whether they are relatively easy or more challenging. So, for example, if you've just finished working on a very challenging reading text, follow it with a lighter activity based on oral interaction.

### Have a clear goal

A task is likely to be more interesting if there is a clear goal other than just 'getting it right'. Some examples: 'See how many ... you can find'; 'See if you can do this in less than five minutes'; 'See if you can guess what's going to happen next...' – these are much more stimulating than just 'Write down the words'; 'Do the exercise'; or 'Read the text'. Such goals don't have to be 'communicative', but they do need to be clear, well within learners' ability, and easily explained. Usually such goals involve some kind of written response that can be shared and discussed later.



## Make questions and tasks open-ended

An open-ended task is one that has lots of right answers, as opposed to a 'closed-ended' one that has one, pre-set, right answer. Open-ended questions or tasks are much more interesting to respond to. They involve many more learners and the responses are unpredictable and varied; also, learners are motivated to listen to each other to make sure that someone else hasn't said what they were going to say. Such questions also tend to produce original and sometimes funny responses that both learners and teachers can enjoy. (See the tips on *Questioning* later in this series.)

## Have a visual focus

In order to stay interested in the lesson, learners need something to look at – the visual channel is a very powerful one, so if you don't give them something to focus on that is relevant to the learning task, their eyes will find something else to look at which may distract them. If the task is text-based, then obviously they'll look at that; if not, then use pictures, objects, the board, or you yourself. In listening comprehension tasks, for example, try not to have the learners listening 'blind': if you can't show them the person speaking (e.g. using video), then at least have a picture that relates to the topic they are hearing about, and perhaps talk about it a bit before they start listening.

## Use higher-order thinking skills

I'll come back to this in the tips on *Questioning* later, as one of the aspects of question design; but using higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) is also important for interest. It is much more interesting to give a task that involves HOTS such as: clarifying logical causes or results of an event; searching for original solutions to a problem; or classifying or prioritising items, rather than lower-order tasks such as gap-filling, recalling, or identifying.

## Activate as many learners as possible

One reason why learners lose interest in an activity is that they are not directly involved. Fairly common situations such as when one learner is answering a teacher's question or one learner comes up to the board to write something, leave most of the class inactive and often bored. Try to make sure that you activate as many learners as possible at the same time or quickly one after the other: so, for example, have several learners together coming up to the board to write, invite multiple answers to any question (see 'Make questions and tasks open-ended' above), and use pair and individual work.

## Use game-like activities

I'm not too keen on telling my learners 'We're going to play a game!' in a sense this devalues the serious, language-learning goal of any lesson component. But the use of game-like techniques in order to add motivation and enjoyment is fine, and I do it all the time, particularly with younger classes. Game-like process involves a clear goal (see above) plus 'rules' that make it a bit more challenging. Guessing activities are one good example: the learners try to find out an answer, which one person knows, but the rule is that the 'knower' can only give information in response to 'yes/no' questions.



## Personalise

Get learners to share facts about themselves, to express their own opinions, tastes, preferences, or to bring evidence from their own experiences. This can be done, for example, as a follow-up to a story (e.g. 'What would you have done in this situation?') or as the basis for an entire activity (e.g. 'Talk to a partner and find at least three things that you have in common.'). or as the basis for grammar practice ('Write down things that you *have done* this year that you think other people have not done.'). Be careful not to be intrusive: tell learners to write or talk only about things they are comfortable sharing with other members of the class.

This item is based on material from Cambridge English Teacher, the professional membership that supports teaching excellence. This article relates to a talk and a discussion forum with consultant Penny Ur. Find out more at:

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