

## Part I: About the speaking activities

### Before we start

The term *activities* encompasses various teaching and learning techniques which are loosely categorized on the following pages. Several of the activities introduced in Part I can be categorized into different types of *speaking activities* on their characteristics and patterns. In a varied and motivating speaking lesson, different *speaking activities* need to be included. Variety is key.

## ◆ Milling activities

The verb *to mill* means to circulate. The meaning of *to mill* therefore aptly describes the process of *milling activities*:

Learners move around the classroom, head for a speaking partner and complete a short dialogue. They then search for their next conversation partner. This activity is sometimes also known as the "market place" activity.

*Milling activities* have the advantage that they substantially increase the amount of time each learner can speak for.

They enable learners to use recently learned structures and useful phrases as well as repeating and consolidating familiar ones.

WS 34–36  
WS 18–20

Through *scaffolding*, learners can use various different aids such as *swap-it cards* (WS 34–36), *prompt cards* (WS 18–20) or questionnaires, etc. You can adjust the level of support needed based on the abilities within your group. You can reduce this support gradually until your students can use the language independently. You can decide if you want to set a time limit or not.

### How to deal with corrections in *milling activities*:

Errors are an important part of the learning process. If errors are constantly corrected though, students may be discouraged from speaking at all. Therefore, try to maintain a generous tolerance level for errors and to handle error correction sensitively. The danger of fossilization is lower than generally believed. It is therefore no problem that the teacher has very little chance to intervene and correct during a *milling activity*.

Errors  
are OK!

At the end of the activity, some brief, constructive feedback is helpful:

*What went well?*

*What can be improved?*

### Movement helps motivation

The movement involved in a *milling activity* motivates performance on two levels. Firstly, the latest neurophysiological findings show that elements of movement greatly improve the learning process. In addition, learners are simply happier if they don't have to sit all the time. At the end of the day, being in a good mood is key to successful learning.

Thinking  
is easier  
when you  
move.

## ◆ Drilling activities



*Drilling* is the frequent imitation and repetition of individual words, phrases or complete utterances. This form of practice focusses primarily on pronunciation and intonation. It also helps when presenting and reinforcing vocabulary and phrases. The term “drill” is sometimes seen in a negative light and teachers can feel uncomfortable doing it. It is therefore often neglected. This doesn't mean, however, that *drilling* has no place in the English classroom. *Drilling* is well-established in ELT methodology, yet some of us use it regularly in our teaching, while others feel it does not work for them or their students.

One of the main objections teachers have to *drilling activities* is that they are often limited to imitation and unnatural, tightly-controlled, form-based speaking practice and that due to this, no real or meaningful communication takes place. However, *drilling activities* are not designed for this purpose. What is really important in getting students to accept *drilling activities* is how willing you are to share the rationale behind *drilling activities*. This transparency will help students accept the role that *drilling activities* play in the language learning process. If you want *drilling activities* to work in your classroom, you need to get your students on board!

Generally speaking, *drilling activities* are run as *whole-class activities*. This means that everyone in the group is included at the same time. A definite advantage is that students get the chance to practice one of the most important parts of speaking – pronunciation – in the safety of the group and without potentially embarrassing themselves.

The role of the teacher may vary. You could be the initial speaker and impulse provider, but you could also completely hand over the role of the speaker to the students. In this case, you can either assume the role of observer or participant.

*Drilling activities* are generally used to practice a very narrow selection of expressions of your choice. Your aim here is to have them practice these expressions in a very controlled and repetitive manner. If errors occur, they are generally pronunciation errors and you can correct them immediately. The approach to error correction in *drilling activities* contrasts starkly with the error-tolerant approach you would use in *milting activities*.

Hard to believe, but true. *Drilling* has become re-established in pedagogy. A quotation from behavioral researcher Herbert Gudjons (2005) serves as an example:

*“Mechanical practice is often equated with cramming, drills and memorization. Although it seems disreputable, it is unavoidable. In every case there are facts that need to be memorized which cannot be developed by thinking and understanding. These include vocabulary, chemical names, [...] Therefore, it is more honest and upright to inform students about what simply needs to be memorized.”*

## ◆ Picture-based activities



Picture-based activities are a component of many Speaking Test formats around the world and are an integral element of Speaking lessons. Photos, images and paintings are all wonderful ways of getting monologues and dialogues started. *Visual literacy* is a core competency we practice in everyday life. The skill of decoding, interpreting and appreciating images needs to be developed in an interdisciplinary manner. English class is ideal for this.

It doesn't take long to find photos. Coursebooks provide a good range of photos which are particularly suitable for developing both speaking and the content of the relevant units. You can find many photos online or in printed media for topics not included in the coursebook, but which are useful for teaching purposes.

One challenge is **selecting photos**, and deciding whether a photo has sufficient potential for a successful speaking activity. This can be so problematic simply because the reaction to a photo can be so individual and depends on the interests, experience and the level of related background knowledge of each individual student. In fact, it is almost impossible to find a suitable photo for all students. This is why we need to train students to talk about a photo which they initially have very little to say about. We need to provide students with phrases and strategies to help them systematically describe an artwork or a photo. This can be done, for example, by using the ideas described in *Describing pictures in four steps*, *10–20–30* or *Talking about paintings and pictures*. If this works, the time-consuming task of finding suitable photos becomes unnecessary. Ultimately, every photo is suitable since "a good speaker can talk about a buttonhole for 10 minutes."

## ◆ Dialogue activities

Here is a selection of ways that you can practice developing speaking in dialogues. You can also find material that you can use with each idea. Photos, texts and realia can all be used to get a dialogue started. In order to keep the conversation going, you can use materials and supporting tools to scaffold the lesson.

Dialogue activities, as the name suggests, are always carried out in pairs. Getting started is very easy, especially if you use these steps:

- Step 1:** Demonstrate the dialogue with a stronger student. Take on Speaking Role A, the student takes on Speaking Role B.
- Step 2:** A second student takes over Speaking Role A. You now take over Speaking Role B.
- Step 3:** A third student takes over Speaking Role A and a fourth student takes on Speaking Role B.
- Step 4:** As soon as the students are familiar with the relevant techniques, these student tandems will be completed independently and the Speaking Roles will be varied.

Depending on how strong the group is and how familiar they are with this technique, you can leave out some steps.

As the students are doing the activity, you can observe them and act as an advisor, giving tips or perhaps correcting any important errors.

### Differentiation

Mixed-level groups respond well to dialogue activities. Quantitative differentiation measures (with a focus on pace) and qualitative differentiation measures (with a focus on performance) can be easily integrated.

Examples of differentiation **during** a dialogue activity:

- Create heterogeneous pairs (helping principle).
- Create homogenous pairs and scaffold the input.
- Leave elements of the dialogue open so student can develop them using their background knowledge.

