

TODAY
YOU
WILL...

>DEVELOP YOUR
CAPACITY FOR
SPONTANEOUS
CONVERSATION IN THE
TARGET LANGUAGE

TONGUE
TIED?

Instead of urging students to memorise stock responses, why not develop their ability to converse spontaneously, suggests Alice Diamond...

Ah... the Controlled Assessment! So much to learn, so much to remember. The ideal MFL learner would be one who, when faced with a CA, can have a spur-of-the-moment conversation in the target language – yet all too often, in a desperate attempt to get good results, students are encouraged to learn answers off by heart. While some young people are able to memorise long and templated responses, those that have the capacity to react instinctively to a situation are much better equipped to earn higher grades, and – more importantly – become the sort of linguists we would want them to be. Complex sentences and impressive vocabulary will always impress examiners, but if a student's mind goes blank under pressure, the ability to respond naturally to the flows of conversation can work wonders. Here are a few activities MFL teachers could use to encourage students towards spontaneity.

STARTER ACTIVITY

A trapdoor exercise gets students speaking, without them having actually to prepare anything themselves.

Students work in pairs, and are given a list of ten sentences, each of which has three alternative endings. For example: *Me encanta mi trabajo dado que es emocionante / bien pagado / interesante*. Each student circles his preferred ending, and his partner reads out each sentence, guessing which option he chose for each one. As soon as the guesser chooses incorrectly, he needs to go back to the beginning and start again.

The repetition helps the sentence structures sink in naturally, while providing three options trains students about the advantage of a varied vocabulary.

The teacher can prepare at least two different sets of sentences – one for Foundation and one for Higher level students, and should pair learners with similar abilities.

TURN OVER
TO CONTINUE >>



MAIN ACTIVITIES+

1 GETTING STARTED

An important factor in oral examinations is to try and respond quickly to the question posed without wasting time hesitating.

The teacher should demonstrate how the key components of a question can be turned into the basis of an answer. For example, by teaching students to remove the question word and changing the verb to the first person, “¿Cómo llegas al colegio?” becomes the answer “Llego al colegio...” with some extra vocabulary required.

This is of course just the sentence starter, but it should give the students the confidence to continue.

A fun way to bring this to life would be to give mini whiteboards to a row of individual students at the front of the class, with each holding one word from the question.

Another student then comes up to remove the question word (“¿Cómo”) and make the changes to the verb on the whiteboard.

Classmates could help her come up with something to write on a blank whiteboard for herself, which would finish off the sentence.

2 GOING FURTHER

Once they can start the sentence off well, students need to be reminded how to impress the examiner with the rest of their answer. They should be trained that structures such as a variety of tenses, connectives, time phrases and object pronouns will help them reach the higher grades.

Try creating a simple board game where each square contains one of these grammatical structures in English. When landing on these squares, if the student can say a sentence about the current topic being studied using the structure he



has landed on, such as negatives (“nunca llego al colegio antes de las nueve”) he gets to move forward along the board, according to the value you attribute to each achievement. Simpler structures such as connectives and negatives would be worth fewer points than object pronouns and clauses, for instance.

You could also include a CHANCE square, where students have to pick up a card with sentences in English written by their peers before the game started, which they then have to translate into the target language in order to move forward. This would again work best when students are grouped with similar level learners and would of course allow for top students to set more challenging translations for their peers.

SUMMARY

To finish the lesson, the importance of sentence structure could be consolidated using a game – by asking the class to work in groups to try and create the longest possible answer to a question (how you do this may depend on the group size although, if you have a Language Assistant, this would be easier as they could take a particular group out of the room). Sitting/standing in a circle, you give them a question in the target language and students go around the circle giving one word or phrase to build an answer to that question, with one learner acting as scribe.

You could add extra rules – for instance, only one person per round can use ‘hesitation’ vocabulary (such as “pues...” or “a ver...”), which are always useful to know! You could also give one student a bell or buzzer and instruct her to listen out for mistakes that the group makes. There should be a discussion at the end of each round to show which group made the longest, most accurate answer and to say what went well and how they could improve.

INFO BAR

+ STRETCH THEM FURTHER

>THE A/A* CANDIDATES COULD BE GIVEN EXTENSION CARDS WITH SET STRUCTURES, WHICH MUST BE INCLUDED IN PARTICULAR ANSWERS. THEY CAN ALSO BE GIVEN MORE CHALLENGING QUESTIONS, FOCUSING ON DIFFERENT TIME FRAMES AND INTRODUCING MORE DEMANDING TOPICS.

>THE MOST ABLE STUDENTS COULD BE USED IN AN ‘ASK THE EXPERTS’ SEGMENT IN THE LESSON WHERE THEY GIVE A 3-MINUTE PRESENTATION ABOUT HOW TO INCLUDE CERTAIN HIGHER LEVEL STRUCTURES IN THE ANSWERS. SIMILARLY, ASK THE STUDENTS WITH GOOD MEMORIES TO PRESENT TO THE CLASS ABOUT HOW THEY REMEMBER KEY VOCABULARY AND ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONS.

+ ABOUT THE EXPERT



Alice Diamond is an MFL AST teaching Spanish and French at Chestnut Grove Academy in Balham, SW London. She has recently set up a free website aimed at providing ideas and resources primarily for new teachers (mflwandsworth.com)

HOME LEARNING

- + Students could practise answering questions spontaneously and then record them onto an MP3 player so they can listen to themselves to see how fluent it sounded, and if they made any mistakes.
- + Listen to radio/watch TV in the TL to help with pronunciation/intonation. Audio-lingua.eu/ is a website with authentic recordings by native speakers on a variety of topics.
- + Create a mind map using vocabulary learnt to use as support in a session with the Language Assistant.
- + Write a list of the best key words and phrases to learn by heart for the exam.
- + Use the techniques learnt/practised in this lesson’s topic in another context to answer questions about a different topic.