

Conversation Lesson – Neighbours

Intermediate Level (can be adapted in either direction)

Approximately 2 hours

When I make a decision about topics for conversation lessons it follows that they have to be something that everybody has experience of. This is more important than choosing an ‘interesting’ topic, although you may question the idea. Simply, the more interesting a topic may be to one student the less interesting it may be to others. Neutral topics tend to revolve around everyday things, but do give everybody chance to talk. And after all, you can make anything interesting if you try.

Neighbours are part of life. I’ll be honest and say that some of the students in my current school live in vast houses in open spaces in the mountains, but by and large, we all have neighbours thus also experience of neighbours and in most cases this will mean both good and bad.

So we’re ready to talk.

Stage 1

What are neighbours?

Without any introduction I give pairs of students six or seven sentences and ask them to discuss them, agree or disagree. They are then expected to choose the definition which best fits their own experience and discuss their reasons for this with their partner.

- *A neighbour is a person who helps you in times of need*
- *A neighbour is a person who lives next door to you*
- *A neighbour is a person who watches you from across the street*
- *A neighbour is a person who knows everything about you, but you don’t know how*
- *A neighbour is a person who feeds your cat when you are on holiday*
- *A neighbour is a person you want to know is there, but never want to see*
- *A neighbour is a person who interests you more than your own family*
- *A neighbour is a person who keeps you awake at night*

At the beginning of a conversation class it pays to have students realise that they have to spend time speaking in pairs, but I’m also sure to show the class that we will come together to share ideas too. Early on in this lesson I bring the group together to achieve this aim, and to make sure that the group is on topic before we move on.

We discuss a few of the statements and relate them to the reality of our experiences. Many of us have noisy neighbours while others find their neighbours reliable to the last. It's nice to talk about this, provided nobody feels obliged to spill too many beans, as we say in England. Put simply, they don't need to say anything about their neighbours if they don't want to.

Stage 2

Vocabulary

Staying with the theme of Stage 1 can help us develop the ideas with a view to getting some new vocabulary into play. A neighbour is... allowed us to explore our experiences of the people who live near us, this time we explore our knowledge of English as I give the class some words to define.

A favour is ...

Trustworthy is ...

Nosey is ...

The neighbourhood is ...

Noisy is ...

Conflict is ...

Gossip is ...

Reliable is ...

There may be more, this is just a sample.

When students have done what they can (with or without dictionaries, although normally I don't allow them in conversation) we share our definitions and I tidy them up where necessary.

Then, once again in pairs, students relate each of the words to the general idea of *neighbours*.

Stage 3

More vocabulary – character words

One of the broadest topics in English is the range of lexis used to describe personality and character. And it's not as if we can narrow it realistically. There are simply hundreds of words in everyday use which lend themselves to saying what a person is like.

In Stages 1 and 2 students investigated some of the basic differences between neighbours and possibly related them to personal experience. Stage 2 ideally finishes with a discussion of neighbours in certain contexts, for example making noise early in the morning or calling the police when they see something suspicious in your garden.

So what kind of person would do these things, and what kind of neighbour do we want? Perhaps this stage could be considered superfluous as it's not neighbour specific, but as experienced teachers will acknowledge, some things can be a constituent part of many topics, and there's always room for a little revision.

When I do this, I focus on words I need my students to meet, or to improve their knowledge of, so when you look at Appendix 1 and find my list of words, you might want to change a few to suit your needs. Always do this, you know your students, but your focus otherwise should be to get them to

apply these words to neighbours, actual or fictional, and to get them to give examples of how these characteristics play out in real life.

I give students the handout, which they often find self-explanatory, but am sure to give instructions because I don't want them to focus on writing words in a table, but rather discuss how these characteristics impact upon the relationship between the family at 23A and those people at 23B. If the former are always polite but lazy do they make good neighbours, and how? If the latter are inconsiderate but honest what are they like to live next door to, and again, how?

I find that doing an example with a strong student gets things started. I might ask them if they would like to live next door to a jealous person, expecting to receive an answer in the negative. Then I'd ask why not, how would this person be a difficult neighbour? The rest writes itself.

Try this for ten minutes, although you may need to keep students supplied with ideas. I find it works very well with a confident class.

Stage 4

Discussion Questions

If you've unearthed my conversation lessons before, you'll have seen (*If + present perfect, future perfect? What form of the conditional is that?*) that each of them involve a stage where students are expected to 'make conversation about their answers to these questions'. Here are some more, pairs, talk. Not very DELTA I suppose, but then I haven't done the DELTA so what do I know? (I have my reasons.)

- *Do you get on well with your neighbours?*
- *Do you often visit them, or do they visit you?*
- *Are they similar people to you, for example are they the same age, or do they have the same interests?*
- *Could you go on holiday with your neighbours? Why (not)?*
- *Do you depend on them for anything, for example to look after your plants and cat while you are away?*
- *Do you know any stories of bad neighbours, either from your friends or from the media?*
- *What is your idea of terrible neighbours?*
- *What would you do if your neighbours were causing you problems?*
- *What would you do if you thought your neighbours were involved in organised crime?*

Now think of three more things you'd like to ask each other and talk about your answers:

As they talk, I monitor and join in, trying not to talk too much, but usually failing. This is just such a great job, healthy enthusiasm is responsible for a great deal of teacher talking time. If you can control it better than I do, however, your students will benefit more.

Stage 5

Better Neighbours

Beforehand, let's remember that sometimes, some things are not up for discussion. I use the early stages of any topic to monitor not just language, confidence or classroom issues but also any presenting sensibilities, so when the time comes to ask the question, *would you change any of your*

neighbours? I know who I might avoid asking. It's not such an issue for this topic, but worth bearing in mind.

As a group, we focus on the real life neighbours that grace or blight our daily lives and I leave students to gleam or groan about them for a few minutes. What I'm trying to do is establish a focus on the idea of perfect neighbours, or better neighbours, as the case may be. I pick things out of the points students make and put them together to make a picture of what a neighbour would ideally be like.

So, you don't like noisy neighbours? Would you prefer somebody who didn't interfere? Is it good to have such considerate neighbours?

Nothing too specific, I just want to get the class on the idea of neighbourly perfection ahead of the next stage, which is flexible, depending on the progress of the lesson or available time.

Stages 6 and 7

Design Your Own Neighbours

or

Choose Your Own Neighbours

The first up is simple, I put students in pairs (maybe different pairs) and ask them to design the perfect neighbours. I write a few things on the board for them to consider, *How often do you see them? What personality do they have? Do you spend time together? What do they do when you are on holiday? Do they have better cars or furniture? Do they invite you for dinner or vice versa?*

Of course, this is an unplanned stage and to be honest I wouldn't use it as well as the next because there is too much overlap, but with less time I might take this option to bridge from the shorter earlier activities to the more involved later ones.

More typically however, I would take the second option.

Appendix 2 contains an activity which keeps students busy and on topic for up to half an hour, if they do everything in full. Quick answers are the scourge of the conversation lesson and for this reason I try to avoid presenting things which can be 'solved' in no time at all. As this one can, I stress to students that they must discuss each one, both pros and cons, before considering their decision.

The activity is simple, but an introduction might help, perhaps I'd ask, *would you prefer to live next door to a pair of wannabe pop stars, or a beer drinking rugby player?*

Then I hand them the activity and usually find they take great advantage of it.

For each of these two activities, when pairs have made their decisions I put them with another pair to compare before we briefly discuss it as a group. In the case of the latter, I ask them who they chose and throw out other considerations, maybe that Kevin and Britney might divorce and not be able to pay the rent. Across the whole class of students, somebody usually has the answer.

Stage 8

Dinner Party

I know this is hardly relevant but briefly, I prefer to use my own activities in class because it gives me a greater connection with the lesson. A deeper sense of satisfaction undoubtedly, but this is of no direct benefit to the students. But when I use my own materials I find that I work much better with them and this can only be good for the class.

Nevertheless, many very great teachers with far more experience than me have inspired a lot of my own teaching and in some cases, contributed directly to it. The next activity is not mine, nor have I made more than superficial adaptations to its content. However I am yet to produce anything better and until I do, this excellent activity taken from Penny Ur's *Discussions That Work*, Cambridge University Press, will continue to help my students improve their speaking skills.

If you prefer to take the activity straight from that book I'm sure you won't be disappointed. However I have included a slightly modified version in Appendix 3 which I would be sure to modify further depending on level or any other language input I saw as necessary.

The scenario: you live in a respectable cul-de-sac along with about eight or ten houses. All the neighbours are friendly with you but they don't get on with each other, and it's ruining the delicate balance of the street.

So you have invited them for dinner with you and your partner to clear the air a bit. Only problem, where can they sit?

I've never known this stage not work wonderfully, but I'll be honest, I rarely see students find the solution. There may not even be one, and I'll go so far as to say that I'd see this as a good thing, but it would be irresponsible of me to send you to your own classes without some insight into the fact that this activity may have no perfect outcome.

Like I said, that's good, it keeps them talking. My job is not to teach dinner parties but to improve fluency and spoken confidence, from time to time a near impossible task can be a very valuable ingredient (provided they don't know).

But bear it in mind. It makes the final stage of discussing their solutions easier. The first time I did this, I asked for seating plans and nobody had established one, and the last thing you want in a fluency building situation is an unforeseen obstacle to speaking. I remain prepared to get students to describe half completed seating plans which in itself can benefit them for several minutes. And let's not forget, in daily life, sometimes we have to explain why something was not possible, incompleteness has its value.

If you don't like the idea, modification of the situations would make this task simpler, but remember, when they finish this, they finish speaking, so avoid anything too easy.

Stage 9

Neighbours from Hell – Debate

When we've discussed where to sit folk for dinner, it pays to focus a little on the good neighbours and bad neighbours from the same list. I could ask students to create character profiles for them and

choose the best person to live next to, and in some ways this could be your choice to round off the lesson.

However this would be too tiring, I've seen momentum increase in the class and am keen to exploit this. It also pays to include a free activity to complement the more controlled ones that have gone before. I move the class from controlled through semi-controlled over the course of a lesson so it follows that the final activity will be uncontrolled, so to speak. Admittedly, I do try to control a few things, but not usually what they say.

I only use the conclusion of Stage 8 as a lead in to Stage 9, for example I may ask somebody if they would like to live next door to Alan Topple. My main purpose now is to introduce the idea of really bad neighbours, you know, not the ones who play Duran Duran after 9 p.m. but the seriously bad types, the ones who play in a band themselves and haven't made enough in royalties yet to have the house sound-proofed. A few words spring to mind, be careful not to teach those too.

I take pictures and pass them round the circle. What would it be like to live next door to these people? Search the net, maybe Google images and bad neighbours will find you some nice shots, but be mindful of copyright laws. Some of the worse pictures defy description, and no, nobody could imagine living next door to them.

Five minutes discussing the thought of life next door and there's nothing more to do, I promptly divide the class into two groups and give them a role card each, Appendix 4.

They get ten minutes to prepare, and with my input this will be enough.

Then I simply split the class into two facing groups and let them argue. If the lesson as a whole has gone well, the class have prepared well and the students are confident speakers, this stage takes total care of itself. I find all I need to do is enjoy it, and make a few notes of errors to group correct after we finish.

After we've done this, students are free to go and yell at their own neighbours. Or hug them, of course.

Suggestions for Follow-up Activities

- Guided improvisations. Students act out a number of neighbourly situations without preparation, for example, *your son's football has come into our garden again, or your cat has eaten my parrot*
- Students write angry post-it notes to stick on their neighbours' doors
- Students design a street where all the neighbours would live in perfect harmony
- Students write to the council to request removal of unruly tenants in the flat above
- Students read some quotations on neighbours and choose their favourite
- Students chip in and buy a local street in an upmarket corner of the city and invite their teacher to live there rent free