

Money conversations

A good conversation lesson can often begin with the students not being sure what the topic of the day is. Not that we want to keep them in the dark for long, but it can get their attention when things aren't so clear from the outset.

But when I teach this lesson I introduce the topic directly, simply to give me chance to point out that nobody will be required to discuss personal matters related to money. It's a lesson based on the general idea of money, even students' own attitudes can be kept private if they so desire. We don't need to know how much money you've got or earn, I may tell them. It can be a relief, on occasions, to those who do consider this a very private matter. And it can remain so, but as a conversation topic, it is a veritable gold mine. This lesson is aimed at low to mid intermediate students and should take around 90 minutes.

Procedure

Stage 1 Quiz (See Worksheet 1)

This is a simple stage intended to introduce the lesson and some relevant lexis.

I divide the class into two teams and ask the questions to the whole class, them scoring one point for a correct answer. I also write relevant words on the board, as this will form the basis of the next activity.

Tip: Often students can shout answers in unison and it makes the quiz unworkable. If you are concerned about this, ask each team to nominate a captain and say that you will only accept answers from them.

When we have finished I quickly erase the points and turn the focus to the words on the board. I ask a few questions to clarify a few points, for example, debt – is this good or bad? What happens if you don't pay?

Then I ask the class to come and add more words to the list (or they say them and I write them), it could top 40 in the end, or may not grow too much. Obviously, I am keen to see students leave class with new vocabulary, but endless lists at the beginning of a conversation class can in fact be counterproductive. Keep it reasonable, my view is that 20 words is enough. It's better to learn 20 than forget 40.

Stage 2 Role-play Vocabulary Conversation

This is a simple way to combine explanations of new words with some useful speaking practice. I put students into pairs and assign roles to each. Perhaps one will be a bank manager. The other may be a father or mother from a poor family. They must then choose words from the board and describe them from their own experience.

For example: **Mortgage**

Bank manager – we make a lot of our money selling mortgages. People always need to buy houses, it is an important part of our business.

Poor parent – we can't pay the mortgage this month, we have so much debt and it's getting hard to feed the children. We're scared of losing the house.

You may wish to assign different roles to different pairs or use the same across the whole class. I have done it both ways and it works fine. If you want to mix pairs after it might pay you to give a wider variety of roles to prolong the conversation, but as I do this for a maximum of ten minutes I don't try to exploit it too far.

I am sure to monitor closely. New words can be misunderstood, it is my job to make sure this does not become a problem.

Stage 3 Vocabulary Sentences

Learning new vocabulary is far better when done in context. To remind students of this, and to give them a few final words and expressions before we move on to freer speaking practice in more realistic contexts, I give them a list of sentences and ask them to intuit (or guess) the words in bold. This is available in Worksheet 2 but for reference here is an example:

Many people over the years have tried to buy the Mask of Tutankhamen from the Egyptian Museum, but unsurprisingly the authorities believe it is priceless so they won't sell it

From your point of view this word is clear, from the students, they may need a little help, and to this end I round this pairs activity off with a brief group discussion of the presenting language, again making sure to ask suitable concept questions that I can be sure the class are clear about it.

Usually I allow them to expand on the topics that crop up, for example I created this lesson in Egypt and therefore it makes sense that students will want to say a bit more about the wonderful treasures in the museum. Your students may well also be proud of something in their country and want to share it with you, especially if you are new in town. Let them, it gives the conversation more soul, which incidentally is when people start learning from the heart, something we as teachers can overlook sometimes. Maybe that's a different topic.

Stage 4 Quotations

Worksheet 3 has a short selection of quotations about money. I should point out I changed the odd word to make them more accessible for Pre-Intermediate and Intermediate level students. You may find them inappropriate for your class and many more are available online. But I'm sure you'll agree with me that it's a useful stage in the lesson, giving the class increasing freedom to express themselves within the framework of the topic.

And it's very simple. In pairs or small groups, give them the list and ask them to consider them in turn. I write a few questions on the board:

What is each person saying?

What do they think of money?

Who do you agree with the most, if any?

Do any of them make you think differently? How?

A variation on this stage is to give each student a single quotation and have them interpret it individually. Then they will go to different students and make conversation about their respective quotations. This method does increase the interaction in class but to my mind merely asks a student to repeat the same points several times. Use your knowledge of your students to decide which approach will benefit them more.

Stage 5 Discussion Questions (optional)

At this stage I would like students to take more control, but still within the framework of the lesson and its topic. So I use a very simple activity in which I put them in pairs, and give them some questions. If you do this, stress that the answers are not the objective as such, rather their discussion.

Do you think that money can contribute to a person's happiness?

What is good about money? What is bad about it?

What do you think rich means?

An old Chinese proverb says that, being rich is knowing when you have enough. Do you agree with this statement?

In general, what proportion of income do you think people should spend and save?

How do you think the world economic situation will affect normal people over the coming year?

Do you think actors and football players etc are paid too much money? Why (not)?

Do people worry about money too much?

An Italian writer called Tiziano Terzani once said that rich people are boring, because they spend their time talking about money. Do you know any rich people like this?

What are typical salaries in your country, for example for a teacher, a policeman, a taxi driver? Are these fair?

Stage 6 Exploring the uses of money

So what can you do with money, generally speaking of course? Students reply that they can spend it, save it, invest it etc. So in pairs they will find it quite easy to make a short list, and then to discuss the implications of each. I interject, asking questions as I monitor, for example: What happens if you spend too much, what are the disadvantages of saving, what are the risks of investing, can anything good come of losing money?

As this draws to a close, maybe after five to ten minutes, I quickly write on the board a series of figures in local currency equivalent. I'll give them here in dollars:

1 cent	\$10	\$10,000
\$1	\$100	\$100,000
\$5	\$1,000	\$1,000,000

Then, almost interrupting them mid-flow, I draw their attention to these figures and ask them, what would be the best way to spend or use each of these amounts of money?

This stage takes care of itself but I monitor, mainly through interest, and am often very interested to hear some of the suggestions made.

Then I go to the board and write \$10,000,000. They usually smile at this, but the stage changes slightly, as in fact now they are not totally free to choose what they do with the money.

Explain to them that they are a small syndicate of four people who have won \$10,000,000 on the lottery. Hand them a page of photos and tell them they must choose two things to buy as a group (so they have to agree) and explain why, and why they haven't chosen the other things.

My usual pictures include:

Ferrari

Tropical Island (they buy it, not visit it)

A luxury penthouse suite overlooking the Thames

An Italian villa

A private jet

A diamond

A yacht

A mars bar (this is just there for fun, you'd be amazed how many rich-for-a-day students still choose it).

Finish off by asking them to compare their choices and reasons with another group, and bring it to a close. It's time to get serious.

Stage 7 Role-plays. Can Money Buy You Happiness?

So what is the downside of money? What are its disadvantages? I invite the class to answer this but don't insist (although there is never a shortage of response). We only discuss the negatives briefly, but I want the class to be aware of them.

But there doesn't need to be a long lead in to the role-plays, by now everybody is on topic and has said a lot, laying down rigid expectations at any stage is not a good way to maintain momentum. So I generally don't introduce this stage, in their fours I give them a role card each and a little time to prepare their thoughts.

The role cards are available at Worksheet 4 and can be adapted for level, language and indeed even opinion input. But I find the range on offer works fine. And although I monitor and take notes of mistakes for subsequent feedback, I don't interfere unless necessary, partly because I don't want to take sides.

Tip: I find that after a well planned and successful conversation lesson the latter activities work so much better and require so much less input from the teacher. So to be frank, I don't try to say too much so late in the lesson. It's a cliché I know to talk about keeping teacher talking time down but in reality I do not need to practise my English and it's quite selfish to limit my students' opportunities to do so. Role plays, when clear and given to a good class are usually excellent, my job is to keep people on topic and to note any language issues we may address subsequently.

And if I notice a student not finding ideas as readily as the others, I may help them out, but otherwise, I let the lesson flow.

Stage 8 Debate – Bank Manager (may be a suitable alternative to Stage 7)

Worksheet 5 offers a fantastic way to round off the class. It is a debate between a bank manager responsible for lending, and a small businessperson who wishes to start a new language school in the city.

I nominate each student A or B, put all the As together and all the Bs. The first group sitting in a small circle gets to choose their role, and generally they choose to be the borrower. So I give them their roles and ten minutes to plan in a group.

This time I monitor and make suggestions. Not all students are familiar with the idea of asking for a loan, and it might be worth pointing out that one or two will not even like the idea. Hopefully the earlier stages in the lesson will make clear any reservations on anybody's part. It's never come up when I've done this activity.

But the groups do come up with useful ideas and ways to express this. Occasionally one group has an excellent idea so I warn the other group what might come up. This is not to help them 'cheat' but to avoid silences that undermine the fluency aspect of the activity. For example, I may say to the borrowers: What if they ask you when you will be able to repay the loan? That brief prompt can keep the activity moving later on.

And we begin, when I'm satisfied that each group will have plenty to contribute. I put them in facing groups and ask the borrowers to make their request. It normally takes care of itself, but if I need to prompt I keep a copy of the role cards in front of me and I interject as I see fit.

Stage 9 Correction and Discussion of Language

Having made a few notes about language issues in the lesson, I give students a feedback session on some of their mistakes. I write some mistakes on the board and say: somebody said this. Can you help them improve it? More often than not the person concerned knew the correct form and they are quick to offer the improvements themselves.

Tip: This ties in with the debate about classroom correction and non-correction. Students often make mistakes because words just come out wrongly. An advanced student may say I going, omitting the am. If I were to correct him or her, am I really helping them? If that student needs me to tell them this is wrong, they'd be in the wrong class. What I encourage my students to do is to listen to what they are saying and to take more responsibility for correcting their own mistakes. That way there is less need to halt otherwise productive conversation to teach language that in reality they already know.

I may point out that they said something, but by and large, and certainly in conversation class, I let it go and let it flow.

You can always teach them later.

Have fun!

Follow-up activities or lessons

Students design new bank notes for their country

Students decide how funding should be allocated in their city or country

Students design an aid programme to distribute funds to schemes in the third world

Students debate prices in their town

Students open a bank account for their teacher and make a deposit each