

## Conversation Lesson – School

**Topic:** School

**Aims:**

- To develop fluency through a range of speaking activities
- To introduce related vocabulary

**Level:** B1+ (can be adapted)

### Introduction

A little imagination, that is, on both the teacher's and the students' part, can transcend the boundaries of an otherwise mundane topic and provide plenty to talk about for a couple of hours. Even those topic areas seen as non-starters can keep a class going for a lesson, provided activities are well structured and each stage is different, challenging, and does not last too long.

How else could we explain the success I've had with this lesson on school?

I guess it would be very self-deprecating for a teacher to assume that school is uninteresting, you, the very person in control of precisely how stimulating lessons are. However fair's fair, students might not always feel overly motivated to talk about it which is why it helps to think outside the box a bit. And although as a teacher I seem to spend vast amounts of my leisure time talking about matters of the classroom, I have not lost touch with the empathy that reminds me, at times oh so painfully, that I am in a very small minority.

### Procedure

#### Stage 1 Running Dictation

- For this well travelled activity to work you need the students to be on your side. A handful of enthusiastic participants might carry the group but because this stage functions as a lead-in, there needs to be blanket participation. Most teachers of my acquaintance are familiar with running dictations and their various pitfalls and benefits, I would suggest treating it with respect, and keeping it short.
- In this case I use the text to introduce a range of lexis on the topic, and of course the topic itself.  
There'd be other ways to do it but as I said two hours talking about school might be got off to a more promising start with a more energetic intro, and this fits the bill.
- Print a short text of about 60 words and be sure that the content can not be seen from more than a few feet away. Be sure to include keywords related to education, or simply use the one I've included here (Appendix 1).

- The procedure is simple, divide the class into two or three groups and sit one person from each group at the back with a pen and paper. This person is the designated writer and nobody else must take the pen. The remaining students will then come to the text and read a portion, retain the information and return to their writer to dictate it to them, with the aim of reproducing the text first. Another team member can come down to continue the process but no more than one person from each team should be at (or near) the text at any one time. They may also not shout words across to their writer, and interaction should be limited to the necessary dictation of words according to the procedure. There may be some need to reorganise the text and this may require discussion, which is fine. I also allow students to direct each other to the right place in the text by answering team-mates' questions like; 'where did you get to?' or 'what word?'.
- Clearly I can take no credit for this activity but have been happy that it works well as an intro rather than a stand alone activity, and when students check their work (as part of a whole group – I find it settles the class) it leads them to the perfect point at which to start the discussion.

### **Stage 2 Vocabulary**

- Using the running dictation as a base (I now give complete copies of the text to groups to be sure they have complete information) we begin to establish a list of words which serve as ingredients for later discussion (or it simply takes us step by step into the longer tasks). Momentarily slipping into teacher-centredness I stand by the board and invite the class to offer words for the list. I ask for nouns, verbs and others.
- Briefly, many of you will have taught in countries where students' experience of English learning revolves round lists. The dreaded lists, be they on the board or in the flimsy exercise book. I'm in Kazakhstan, which is a super place and very dear to me, but seems to produce students who think that new vocabulary has to be copied off the board for it to be learned. In some ways this stage can be quite a reassurance.
- So we have several lists and I ask students to work in pairs to add five words to each list which they do quite promptly. I or one of the class add them to the board, and we share meanings where necessary. If I am unhappy that the words are too basic I add more, and again, we share meanings.
- When we have twenty or so, we are ready to begin.

### **Stage 3 Your school days**

- Although sadly education is not something children everywhere have available, I suggest it is very unlikely that you have any student with no experience of school. Therefore this stage of the discussion writes itself, simply put students in pairs and ask them to choose eight of the words and describe a school experience related to each. *Head teacher* for example may lead a student to speak of a time they were in trouble for something and sent to the office. Who knows? I am sure to monitor and input where

necessary, but there's little need for ideas, mainly only language and at this stage students aren't expected to take long turns.

- Vary it a bit, ask students to ask additional questions in each case, but avoid over-structuring this stage, it's still really a warmer, and a way to get students firmly on topic.

#### **Stage 4 Discussion Questions**

- In every conversation lesson I teach I give students some questions I'd prepared earlier. There are better ways to do this, student-centred learning can encompass every stage and I've never taught a class yet which was incapable of making its own questions. However I have faced my demons on this, I find it a very good way to give students talking time without asking too much of them. These questions lead them through a range of relevant sub-topics and really give them chance to talk. They can vary the order, vary the wording and the timing, just be sure they avoid short and simple answers.

#### **In pairs, make conversation about your answers to these questions:**

- *Did you enjoy your time at school, in general? Why (not)?*
  - *What did you like best? What did you hate the most?*
  - *Do you think education in your country is generally of a good standard?*
  - *How could it be improved?*
  - *If you were Minister of Education, what's the first thing you'd do?*
  - *Were you a good student at school?*
  - *Do you have any interesting stories from your school days? What's your best memory?*
  - *Did you use to play sport at school? Were the facilities good?*
  - *Have you ever fallen asleep in class? What happened?*
  - *Do students and children wear uniforms here? Should they? Why (not)?*
- A nice way to round this off is to come together as a group and ask people what their partner said. I vary the questions, it keeps people on their toes... for example, *Aizhan, was school a good experience for Aliya?* After five minutes (maximum) we have shared our experiences of school and are ready to move on.
  - *One tip, some people have very bad memories of school. During this stage, listen carefully to get an idea of anything you might like to avoid asking in front of the whole class. It won't happen too often, but is worth considering.*

#### **Stage 5 Subject Ranking**

- A lot of my understanding of teaching conversation comes from the excellent *Discussions that Work* by Penny Ur, Cambridge University Press, so by rights I should not only recommend the book but credit the next activity to it. By this stage students should be speaking far more fluently so I am careful not to undermine this with a return to the board, but a change of focus would ideally be introduced after a break in proceedings.

- Ask the class what they studied at school (or 'are studying') and write the list on the board.  
Potentially you have a list of thirty subjects but the optimum size would be five or six so be selective as to what you write. I am sure to reassure students whose contributions do not make it to the board that they are right.
- Typically, we end up with something like this, which is fine, in fact, very useful:

*Maths, Russian (or whatever L1 is there), Science, History, English, Information Technology*

- I ask students, in pairs, to put these subjects in order according to three criteria, and expect reasons for their decisions.
- The criteria could be an adjective, or a question, but for now, let's keep it simple...

*Easy Interesting Useful today*

- You might not feel the need for all pairs to complete lists for all criteria, but for about seven or eight minutes I monitor while students discuss how maths was the least interesting and how history is of limited use to them now. I take an interest in their preferences, and may offer views of my own, providing it doesn't shift the focus onto me
- Then we come together and I ask people to tell me what they think is easiest etc. With more time we may do this as a pyramid discussion and even produce class statistics but by now, with plenty more still to do, the stage has served its purpose and it is time to move on.
- All that might remain would be to contest the unthinkable suggestion that English is 'not useful'. Fortunately, it has never happened yet.

### **Stage 6 Opinion Corners (optional)**

- I usually skip this stage but as an option you might want to use it to bridge the gap between Stage 5 and Stage 7. If your lessons last more than two hours it will also keep the lesson moving but as most lessons don't, this stage can be considered superfluous.
- Earlier in my career when desperate for practical ideas I spent a lot of time at [escafe.com](http://escafe.com) and am grateful to whoever posted this lesson. I have never even modified it, there's been no need.
- Post a notice in each corner of the room, each of, AGREE, DISAGREE, COMPLETELY AGREE and COMPLETELY DISAGREE. I also put DON'T KNOW on a chair in the middle of the room.
- To do this, you need to prepare a few statements in advance you think will divide opinion. Simply read them to the class who then walk to and stand by the response of their choosing. This becomes a ready debate and needs no planning. Just be aware that you might need to provide some input of your own, if it helps you to plan it this can be useful.

Suggested statements:

- *School uniform is essential*
- *Pupils are not given enough homework*
- *A good teacher is a strict teacher*
- *Exams are getting easier*
- *Teachers should receive salary according to exam results*
- *School should be three days a week*
- *Education should be free*
- *All pupils should study cookery and sewing*

### Stage 7 Choosing a School

- Now business starts and it's time for students to make some practical decisions that will require discussion, but should be relatively easy to reach.
- I make a choice depending on students' age. If they're under 18 I ask them to choose for themselves, if over I ask them to choose for their children (even if they don't have any). What? Well, I give them a handout with information about four schools and ask them to choose one, after discussing the pros and cons of each.
- The handout is in Appendix 2, it can be modified but you will see a cross section of schools and students usually know pretty quickly where they'd prefer. As a consequence, stress to them that they must broaden the discussion and not focus on their choice for the time being.
- If I interject it would typically be with questions like, *so what would you gain from going to this school? or, do you think your son would like studying here?*
- And yet hopefully there is no perfect school. Students should find something wrong with each, and right with each because I want them to add a fifth school for consideration, which they do in Stage 8.

### Stage 8 Design the perfect school

- I won't say too much here, all that is required is to give students the task of designing a fifth school for the list.
- When they have done this I ask them to present it to the class, and we vote for the best.

### Stage 9 Education – right or privilege?

- This stage tends to round off the lesson nicely, although there are a number of follow-ups you could do either in this lesson or subsequent ones to exploit the topic even more. Perhaps you'd be using this lesson to complement the coursebook in which case it is time to go back to it. For the time being, a whole class debate (or groups if size demands it) is a nice way to finish this lesson. You'll need half an hour, maybe this will require chopping and changing of previous stages but for this to work it needs to come last, and not be curtailed too much.

- I begin by asking students about education in their country, with a view to finding out if it is largely free or available privately. It doesn't really matter what the answers are, we can still investigate class opinion as to whether education should be free for all, or perhaps available at cost to those who can pay.
- Divide the class into two groups and give one group Role Card A, the other B, from Appendix 3. Give them a moment to read the situation and ask some concept questions to check understanding of the task, I only hope your use of concept questions is better than mine. That's another story.
- When minds are focused and groups are ready, I leave them to prepare their arguments, questions and reasons. I find they need little help, but perhaps to get them started I do give them chunks of language, later on only to give words. It's not so important, students will still speak.
- Ten minutes is minimum, fifteen better but when you feel they are ready to rumble organise the class into two facing groups. Remove all potential missiles from view and introduce the arguments. You might find that one group takes it up from here and the debate will rage.
- Of course, it depends on the prep that was done, my job is to make sure they have enough to say. The rest takes care of itself.
- The lesson is concluded with a brief correction session on mistakes which I have noted during the stages. I write mistakes on the board and ask all the class to improve the English. It is not important who said it, more so that they don't say it again.

### **Suggested Follow-up Activities**

- Students interview a teacher for a job at their school
- Students design flyers or posters to advertise their school
- Students describe a typical teacher or pupil at one of the schools from Stage 7
- Students write to the head teacher presenting requests for their school
- The class does a general knowledge quiz with a school subject theme, e.g. history questions, geography etc
- Guided improvisations. Students role play school situations without preparation. This could be, a head teacher telling a teacher his/her teaching is not up to standard, or, a teacher telling a parent their son/daughter's behaviour is unacceptable, etc
- Students start their own language school and offer their teacher a job, with considerable pay rise and enviable paid leave allowances. If they are feeling generous ask for a free DELTA too.