

Socialising (1): Breaking the ice

Topic: Socialising: Breaking the ice

Aims:

- To discuss and deal with some of the psychological issues connected with starting conversations with strangers;
- To teach some useful phrases for starting a conversation and leaving a conversation;
- To provide practice and feedback of the situation of starting and leaving conversations with strangers.

Level: Intermediate (B2) and above

Introduction

For many people, the idea of walking into a room full of strangers and trying to socialise with them can be terrifying, especially if you have to use a foreign language. The barriers to 'breaking the ice' in a situation like this are just as much psychological as linguistic, which is why this lesson aims to get students thinking about the situation (through a quiz-based discussion and jigsaw reading) as much as speaking and practicing the skill of starting conversations with strangers.

1. Lead-in

Elicit from the class whether anyone has experience of attending an event where almost all the other attendees were strangers, for example:

- A large conference;
- A business mixer (i.e. a social event where businesspeople from many companies meet up for a meal or drinks, in order to make new contacts);
- An external training course (i.e. not one organised within a single company);
- A formal party.

If they have limited experience of such events, elicit some events that they might attend in their future careers. Discuss with the class how easy / difficult it was/ would be for them to start conversations with strangers. Discuss also how it might be easier or more difficult to do this in English.

2. Quiz

Divide the class into pairs or small groups, and distribute copies of the quiz. Elicit the meaning of the phrase **breaking the ice**, both the literal meaning (i.e. breaking through a layer of ice on water in order to allow boats to sail across it) and the metaphorical meaning (i.e. breaking the initial barrier between strangers, in order to allow a natural conversation to start).

Make sure students realise that the aim of the quiz is to generate discussion rather than find the 'correct' answers. They should therefore discuss each other's answers as they work through the quiz (e.g. Have you ever been in that situation? Why would you do that?). If they agree with none of the answers to a

particular question, they should choose the answer that is closest to their own, but also explain their own answer to their partners.

Allow around 10 minutes for students to work through the quiz, and then discuss their answers with the class, paying attention to any vocabulary problems (e.g. *to persuade sb to do sth*, *to recognise sb*, *to join in*, *a queue*, *eye contact*, *to escape*, *a buffet*).

3. Reading

Distribute copies of parts 1 and 2 of the reading text, so that each student has only one text, but each group has at least one person reading each text. Students read their texts to find which quiz questions are discussed in their part of the text.

After about five minutes, students go through the quiz again to discuss which part of the text mentioned each question and what it said about them.

Finally, discuss with the class whether everyone agrees with all the advice in the text. You could also check they understand the following words and phrases from the text, and what was said about each of them: *networking*, *to point sb in the direction of sth*, *a potential customer*, *daunting*, *to pretend to do sth*, *to admit sth*, *to get involved in sth*, *polite*, *to interrupt sb*, *embarrassed*, *your own worst enemy*, *to engage sb in conversation*, *to make the effort to do sth*, *to deserve sth*, *to hang around*, *to strike up a conversation*, *superficial*, *engaging*, *to moan*, *small talk*, *patience*, *to hide*.

Answers

1. According to the text (part 1), the best reason for attending a conference is (b).
2. Part 1 of the text recommends (a) as the best approach, but (b) is also a good strategy. Strategy (d) is even worse than (e). Part 2 recommends (c) and repeats that strategy (d) is bad.
3. Part 1 of the text says situation (b) is an opportunity, not a problem.
4. Part 2 of the text recommends options (c) and (d). Part 1 confirms that (a) is a bad strategy. Option (b) is implied in the advice not to hide, at the end of part 2.
5. Part 1 warns against too much selling, but this does not mean you can't talk about work (c). Part 2 warns against moaning (a, g) and recommends (b) and (h) as good topics of conversation. Topics (c), (d) and (e) are fine, but not ideal as conversation openers. The text doesn't mention topic (f), but it is definitely a risky topic to bring up with strangers.

4. Useful language: Ice-breakers

Print enough copies of the worksheet for each group of 3 – 4 students to have a separate copy, which you should cut into slips of paper and for each student to have their own copy, which you can distribute later.

Students work in their groups to match the beginnings with the endings to make phrases for starting conversations. Note that many of the phrases are taken from the reading text. The first group to finish is the winner.

While early-finishers are waiting for the other groups to finish, give each student a complete copy of the worksheet (i.e. not cut up) to repeat the matching activity on paper without looking back at the slips of paper. Finally, go through the answers with the class and discuss which of the phrases/strategies your students would choose to use in an international conference.

As a follow-up, students can test each other in pairs by folding their worksheets along the horizontal central line and reading the beginning of a phrase in order to elicit the ending from their partner.

Answers

1d 2k 3l 4t 5f 6r 7i 8o 9e 10n 11q 12m 13s 14c 15g 16j 17a 18b 19p 20h

5. Leaving a conversation

Elicit from the class some strategies for leaving a conversation (i.e. is it better to lie about your reason for leaving? Is it acceptable to simply walk away?).

Distribute the worksheet so that each student has a copy. Students then work alone to complete the three short speeches using the words from the box at the side. They compare their answers in pairs before feeding back to the class. Discuss with the class which of the three speeches – or which combination of the sentences from the speeches – they would use. You could ask some volunteers to cover their worksheets and give a short leaving-a-conversation speech from memory.

Answers

- 1 spotted; urgently; nice; card; email; touch; proper; later
- 2 sorry; urgent; outside; Hopefully
- 3 excuse; need; couple; have; on; mine; free; pleasure; rest

6. Ice-breaking role-play

Cut up the slips of paper and distribute them so that each student has six slips. They should write their name, job title and company name on each slip. This could be real information or, if your students are very creative, they could make up the information about themselves.

Go through the rules of the role-play very carefully with the class:

- There is a strict time limit of ten minutes – but students should not look at the clock or their watches all the time.
- During that time, students should pretend they are strangers at a conference.
- They should start conversations with the other people in the class, exchange business cards at an appropriate time, and leave the conversation politely in order to continue meeting people.
- The aim is to talk to five different people and to collect exactly five different business cards from the people they have spoken to. If they collect too many business cards, it means they are going too fast. If they don't collect enough, it means they are too slow.
- They can use the information on the business cards to help make conversation.

- The maximum group size is three people. If a fourth person joins, one member of the group needs to make an excuse and leave.
- They should try to make their conversations as natural as possible, and not simply treat it as a game.

Monitor carefully both for accuracy of language and for the effectiveness of students' ice-breaking skills. At the end of the time limit, stop the role-play and ask how many business cards each student has collected. Give an elicited feedback on their performance.

