UK educational system

Topic

Education systems, gap years

Aims

- To learn vocabulary of schools and exams
- To compare educational systems
- To practise reading skills
- To practise writing skills

Age/level

Young learners aged 12+ or adults
CEFR level B1

Time

60–90 minutes

Materials

1. worksheet (one per learner)
2. reading texts (one per pair of learners, cut in half)

Introduction

This lesson looks at various aspects of the UK educational system. In this lesson, learners are introduced to the names of some main school stages and national exams and are given the chance to compare with their country's educational system. Then they practise note-taking and speaking skills with a jigsaw reading activity based on a text about gap years from the British Council's Trend UK department and plan their perfect gap year with a partner. Finally they think about different school rules, then they imagine it is the year 2040 and write a post for their school's reunion website, telling their old schoolmates about their lives in 2040.

If you haven't had first-hand experience of the UK educational system yourself, you can have a look at these links:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_United_Kingdom
https://www.gov.uk/national-curriculum
https://www.hmc.org.uk/about-hmc/projects/the-british-education-system/

There are differences in the educational systems in the different countries that make up the UK, so bear this in mind.

Procedure

1. School journey	This task introduces learners to the main types of schools and national exams in the UK. Be aware that the systems vary slightly across the UK – the example below is based on my own school journey. In a jumbled order write on the board different types of schools and exams: university GCSEs (9 subjects) primary school a degree secondary school A-levels (3 subjects) play group When the learners have read the list, ask them to ask you questions so that they can put the schools and exams into chronological order: • 3–5 years old: play group • 5–11 years old: primary school • 11–18 years old: secondary school – GCSEs (9 subjects) at 16 and A-levels (3 subjects) at 18 • 18 years old: university – a degree Ask learners to complete the first two columns of the table on the worksheet.
2. Let's compare	This task leads on from Task 1. Ask your learners questions to find out about the educational system in their country. If you are already familiar with it, ask them to first complete the second two columns in the table and then tell you what similarities and differences they can find.
3. Gap years	This is a reading task using an article from the British Council's Trend UK department. Before you begin, make sure learners understand the word 'gap'. Give them an example, such as a place in the classroom where there's a gap, e.g. between some furniture, or ask them why they need to be careful when stepping off a train (to avoid the gap between the train and the platform). Then explain the idea of taking a gap year* to break up your studies. If you or your friends took one, tell your learners about what you/they did. Put learners into two groups. Give each learner in one group a copy of reading text A and each learner in the other group reading text B. Give them time to read the text and work together to check vocabulary and make notes of the main points. Then pair up one A with one B and ask them to tell each other about the text they read. *A gap year is a period of time, usually an academic year, taken by a student as a break from formal education. It is often spent travelling or working.*
4. Plan your perfect gap year	This task follows on from Task 3 and is better suited to learners who could imagine themselves at the age of a gap year learner (16+). Put learners in pairs and go through the instructions: *Next year you don't have to go to school – you're going to take a gap year with your friend instead! Luckily money isn't a problem, so you can go wherever you like and do whatever you want. It will be an unforgettable year. Work in pairs and plan your perfect gap year.*

	If you think your learners will need help, bring in some travel brochures and an atlas to help them, or if you have access to a computer room, they could plan their trip online using English language websites. They could present their plans to the other learners.
5. School rules	Ask learners about the rules in their school. Find out a couple and write them up on the board. Then ask learners what they think about these rules. Then ask learners to think about their 'ideal' school. Tell them it's their perfect school and they can decide on the rules themselves. Give some examples, like 'You're allowed to use mobile phones in class', 'You don't have to do any homework', etc. Learners complete the table and can then compare ideas.
6. School reunions	School reunions are events where former learners of a school (usually those who finished school the same year) get together a number of years later in order to catch up. Ask learners to imagine it's the year 2040, and they have lost touch with all their classmates. However, their old school has just written to all its ex-learners to organise an online reunion on a special website set up by the school. To participate, they need to write a post about what they're doing now, in 2040. They can write about their job, their family, where they're living, their future plans, etc. However, they shouldn't write their name! Encourage learners to use their imaginations when writing their post! When they have finished, collect all the posts in. Mix them up and hand them back out to the class, making sure nobody has their own. Ask learners to read out the post they got and, as a class, decide which learner wrote it!

Contributed by

Jo Budden