



Tips for Teachers

Using Lateral Thinking Games as an Oral Fluency Activity Ding Jiali, Jiangnan University, China

Despite the current emphasis on communicative language teaching, many EFL teachers report that it is difficult to maintain student interest in developing speaking skills in English. Among the reasons are large multilevel classes, rigid curricula, and student concerns about high stakes exams, which typically do not emphasize speaking skills. Recently, however, my colleagues and I have had some success in using “lateral thinking” games with our students. Lateral thinking is a term that was coined in 1967 by a psychologist from Malta named Edward de Bono to describe a process in which people attempt to solve problems in novel or unconventional means. [Interested readers can find an abundance of information about Dr. de Bono and lateral thinking games on the Internet.]

A common version of a lateral thinking game goes like this: *You are on a sinking ship near a deserted island. You can swim to the island, but you have no idea whether you will need to survive there for a week or for the rest of your life. You can take only eight items with you, so you must choose items that will help you prepare food and water, build a shelter, make fire, and, if possible, attract rescue. Look at the list of items below. Decide which ones you will choose, and be prepared to explain why.*

To adapt this technique for our English students, we followed this procedure. First, we set the scene by projecting images of a sinking ship and deserted islands. We explained the situation and the problem that needed to be solved. Our school is equipped with PowerPoint®, but pictures, blackboard sketches, or even oral instructions could work just as well. Next, we showed the list of items and made sure that everyone understood them. Then, students made their selections and thought about how to defend their choices. In a true lateral thinking exercise, the emphasis would be on the argument—would the items chosen really work in the manner that the student has said they would? Why or why not? However, our goal was to develop English language

fluency, so we did not pay strict attention to the logic in our students' choices or arguments. The examples that follow illustrate, in our students' own words, the potential of lateral thinking games to stimulate the development of cognitive, creative, and linguistic skills.

Example 1

I pick the 8 items in order: flashlight, matches, candles, a metal bowl, a mirror, 10 nails, safety pins, a plastic tarp. I am an optimist, so I would not worry about what will come in the long future, I reckon I will be rescued by a passing by ship within a week. So I will enjoy my days on the island everyday of the week. I may use the nails and safety pins to make a tool and catch a rabbit on the island, then I use the metal bowl to cook the meat, of course dry twigs and wood are plenty on the island, so it is not difficult for me to make an open fire with the dry matches I wrapped in the plastic tarp when I swam to the island. After cooking I enjoy the rabbit meat and some apples then comfortably get to my hut, the plastic tarp on a tree. I use the flashlight or the candles to get some light in the evening because I enjoy reading. Even in that situation I can not give up studying. I want to read the book on public relationship (sorry which I missed when I picked the 8 items, so I actually picked 9 items) so that I can develop even better in this area when I get back to the civilization soon. In the morning, I will use my mirror to look at myself. I know I am a handsome man. To look at myself in the mirror will give me more confidence to spend days alone on the island.

Example 2

I want to pick any 7 items on the list. Because my intention is that I will pick the 8th a very special one, which is my friend. So that my friend can pick another 7 items and he can do the same as myself by picking the 8th item as his friend, so that in the end, we get enough people and all the necessary items to survive on the island. Meanwhile more people there on the island, more ways to have opportunities to survive, we do not have to feel lonely. We can help each other and we can even plant food and hunt food or fish and make tools together. In a word, we have more chance to survive and even have more ways to get back to the civilized world...

Some items were popular and chosen by many students. For example, they frequently chose the axe, mirror, magnifying glass, and ball of string, but they had to learn how to use their English to give reasons to support their choices. One student chose the umbrella as one of her eight items. At first, other students laughed at her, but they stopped when she explained that she could open the umbrella, float it on the water, and transport other items in it. Perhaps the most important outcome of the activity was

that students enjoyed themselves using English while developing their creative thinking at the same time.

In conclusion, building student interest in an EFL speaking class can be a challenge. However, occasional use of lateral thinking games can be an effective means of stimulating interest in speaking English and providing a communicative context for its use.

About the Author

Ding Jiali teaches at the School of Foreign Studies at Jiangnan University in Wuxi, PR China. She was a visiting scholar at the Australian National University in 2000 and 2001. She wishes to acknowledge her colleagues Terry Pickett and Chris Buckley for their support and assistance in using lateral thinking tasks in her English classes

Appendix

Below is a possible list of items for the lateral thinking game described in this article.

matches	a needle
a candle	a plastic bag
a metal bowl	a bag of apples
a pair of sunglasses	a hat
a package of nails	an umbrella
safety pins	a hatchet
a plastic tarp	a spoon
a jack knife	a pair of chop sticks
a hometown map	a pair of shoes
a newspaper	lip gloss
a book	a first aid kit
a cell phone	a cup
a laptop computer	a pair of socks
a magnifying glass	a pair of scissors
a pair of gloves	a small mirror
a package of bandages	a hot water bottle
a ball of string	a blanket