

## TIPS FOR TEACHERS

### Creating a Sustained Context for Speaking in the EFL Classroom



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While working as an assistant English teacher in Japan for several years, I had the opportunity to work with many teachers, many students, and in many schools. Typically, students were more comfortable with print-based textbook exercises than with speaking and listening. Although we planned speaking activities based on our textbook lessons every week, students had difficulty seeing the value or wanting to participate in them. It was discouraging to expend so much effort in planning for so little return in participation. Finally, my colleagues and I realized that the English speaking contexts portrayed in our textbooks were too foreign or remote for our students to understand and that each lesson presented a new, but equally foreign, context. We decided to try creating a more familiar local context for speaking that could be sustained over several lessons, making it easier, (we hoped), for students to participate. Our initial experiment met with modest success. We were able to reinforce target language points, build better connections from one lesson to the next, and engage students in more speaking than was previously possible. The process described below may help other teachers create a classroom context that encourages students to speak more English, too.

#### **Initial Planning**

The most important step is making a decision about the role play context. We looked ahead in our course textbook and noticed that the next lesson focused on making requests for food in a restaurant. Going to a restaurant is an occasional activity for our students, but typically adults are the ones making requests or purchases. We wanted a setting that young people could relate to. Perhaps because the textbook lesson focused on food, we thought of the convenience store. Convenience stores are everywhere in Japan (and many other places as well these

days). Everyone purchases snacks, beverages, magazines, school supplies, and personal items at their nearby convenience store, including international residents and visitors in Japan who are often English speakers. Thus, the convenience store is a familiar, local setting for our middle and high school students and one where they might observe or eavesdrop on real people really speaking English. Thus, we decided to use the convenience store as our role play context for several English lessons. In other locales or with adult learners, teachers might select a local tourist site, a multinational corporation, an international airport, or a professional conference as the role play context. The only requirements are that it be familiar to the students and rich with activity so that it can be used for multiple English lessons.

### Suggestions for Implementation

1. Expect some confusion at first. It always takes a while to teach a new game or begin a new project, but once the context is firmly established, more time will be available for English practice and less needed for classroom management.
2. Establish a routine. For example, on a day when the textbook lesson includes a new dialog or speaking activity, show the students how to adapt, personalize, localize, and extend it for use in your role play context. Form groups and identify roles in preparation for the next lesson. The next day, preserve a few minutes for the role play. On subsequent role play days, make sure students review their previous role plays as well as try out the new one. Each role play day should create opportunity for review as well as new practice.
3. Begin with stable student groups. In the early phase of establishing a sustained role play context, class time will be used more efficiently, and students will feel more comfortable if they are working with the same peer group. As the routine and context grow familiar and as students build experience, they will be able to adjust better to new groups, partners, and roles.
4. Give students some autonomy. For example, our students chose the names for their convenience stores, listed (a minimum of 30) items available in their stores, and created their own pricelists.
5. Enlist student help in enriching the role play environment. For our convenience store context, students can bring in empty snack food packages and beverage containers or just the labels, if storage space is limited. Other forms of realia may include pictures, calendars, used clothing, props, and student-made materials. Being able to move, handle materials, and set the “stage” for role play helps students mentally relax, re-energize, and get into their roles.

6. Gradually increase the amount of interaction and complexity of the task. For example, with our convenience store role play, we asked students to try to “save money” (by comparing prices at different “stores”) and to “purchase” no more than two items from each store. These guidelines increased the number of interactions which, for language learners, means more practice, more review, more confidence, and growing fluency. The guidelines also added to the authenticity of the role play.
7. Explore opportunities for the bigger stage. While I have not yet tried these ideas, I see how sustained role play could grow into full-scale simulation or even a dramatic production. For example, teachers might ask for groups of student volunteers to demonstrate their role play skills at a local English camp, for a visiting international delegation, or during an annual school festival.

### Closing

Despite its global reach, English is often perceived as “just” a required subject of study for many middle and high school students and their teachers in EFL contexts. By creating a familiar, locally relevant classroom context for English use, teachers may be able to help their students understand, enjoy, and speak English more. When this happens, students’ overall perception of English, not to mention proficiency in it, can improve as well.

### About the Author

*Robert Primeau was an assistant language teacher in Japan with the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Programme for four years. His interests include language development in young children, the interplay between language and culture, and students’ perceptions of English study. He holds a bachelor’s degree in arts and political science from Concordia University in Montreal, Canada and is currently pursuing the MA in TESOL at Nagoya University of Foreign Studies.*