The Student-Centered Classroom

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Table of Contents

Introduction

Some students say:

- ■ "Why do we have to do pair work and group work?"
- ■ "When I speak English, I feel stupid because I make lots of mistakes and don't know enough vocabulary."
- ■ "I don't want to speak English until my English is much better."
- ■ "I don't want to listen to other students speaking incorrect English because I'll learn their mistakes."
- ■ "My teachers speak the best English. I want to learn from them."

This booklet will respond to those comments.

We don't want our students to become people who:

- ■ Can't communicate in the real world
- ■ Panic when they can't think of the right words to use
- ■ Are tongue-tied because they're worried about making mistakes and losing face
- ■ Can't survive without a teacher to help them and guide them
- ■ Look away in embarrassment when someone asks, "Can anyone here speak English?"

A student-centered approach helps students to develop a "can-do" attitude. It is effective, motivating, and enjoyable. This booklet sets out to discuss how this approach can be implemented. It also deals with the problems that may arise.

In the following chapters, unless otherwise specified, "we" means "we teachers" and "working together" means "working together in pairs or groups."

1 | *Autonomous Learning*

Working together

In a student-centered class, students don't depend on their teacher all the time, waiting for instructions, words of approval, correction, advice, or praise. They don't ignore each other, but look at each other and communicate with each other. They value each other's contributions; they cooperate, learn from each other, and help each other. When in difficulty or in doubt, they do ask the teacher for help or advice but only after they have tried to solve the problem among themselves. The emphasis is on working together, in pairs, in groups, and as a whole class. Their teacher helps them to develop their language skills.

A student-centered classroom isn't a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do. It's a place where we consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time. The teacher's role is more that of a facilitator (see Chapter 6) than instructor; the students are active participants in the learning process. The teacher (and the textbook) help to guide the students, manage their activities, and direct their learning. Being a teacher means helping people to learn – and, in a student-centered class, the teacher is a member of the class as a participant in the learning process.

In a student-centered class, at different times, students may be working alone, in pairs, or in groups:

- Working alone, preparing ideas or making notes before a discussion, doing a listening task, doing a short written assignment, or doing grammar or vocabulary exercises
- Working together in pairs or groups, comparing and discussing their answers, or reading and reacting to one another's written work and suggesting improvements
- Working together in discussions or in role-plays, sharing ideas, opinions, and experiences
- Interacting with the teacher and the whole class, asking questions or brainstorming ideas

Also in a student-centered class, students may be teacher-led:

- Before students work together, their teacher will help them prepare to work together with explanations and pronunciation practice.

- While students are working together, their teacher will be available to give advice and encouragement.
- After they've finished working together, and the class is reassembled, their teacher will give them feedback, offer suggestions and advice, make corrections, and answer questions.

When students are working together in English, they

- Talk more
- Share their ideas
- Learn from each other
- Are more involved
- Feel more secure and less anxious
- Use English in a meaningful, realistic way
- Enjoy using English to communicate

But some of them may

- Feel nervous, embarrassed, or tongue-tied
- Speak English and make a lot of mistakes
- Speak in their native language, not in English
- Not enjoy working together

In the following chapters, we'll look at these problems and ways of dealing with them.

2 | *Classroom Management*

Large classes

The ideal size for a student-centered language class is probably 12! (The number 12 can be divided into 6 pairs, or 4 groups of 3, or 3 groups of 4, or 2 groups of 6 – and 12 students can easily hear one another in a whole-class activity.) But, of course, we can't choose the number of students in our classes. Most classes are larger, many classes are far larger. Is there a maximum size beyond which student-centered learning is inappropriate?

Actually, the larger the class, the more necessary it is to have a student-centered class. The only way to give all the students time to speak is by having them work together. The difference between a large class and a smaller class is the amount of time we have to monitor the groups. With, say, 30 students we can usually get around to all the groups in a lesson, and spend a few moments listening to each group and making notes. With a very large class this isn't feasible, so we should keep track of which groups we didn't listen to in one lesson, so that in the next lesson we can give them our attention.

In a crowded classroom, we may not even be able to reach some students as we circulate. We may need to rearrange the students and where they sit. (See Seating on page 8.) It's also important for students to sit close together so that they can talk softly and still hear one another. A lot of students talking loudly make a lot of noise! (See Noisy classes on page 11.)

- Keep track of which groups you listen to so no one gets left out.
- Rearrange groups to be near enough for you to overhear as you walk around.
- Seat students close together so they can talk softly and still hear one another.

Very small classes

How should students in a very small class work together? Should we take part in discussions as an equal partner? In a small class, students tend to be more teacher-dependent, waiting for praise or encouragement while they talk.

It's hard to monitor a conversation and participate in an activity at the same time. It may be better to sit outside the group while students work together, and not be part of the group. Nodding encouragement, showing

interest, and answering questions are fine, but constant intervention isn't likely to encourage students to behave autonomously. We need to judge when it's helpful to add a comment or contribution, or when it's spoon-feeding.

- Avoid becoming part of the groups – small classes tend to be overly teacher-dependent.
- Encourage students and answer their questions as you move from group to group.

Mixed-ability classes

In many ways, every class is a mixed-ability class. Even students who have studied together all the time will have varied mastery of the language or remember different things. Some will be better at different skills: reading, writing, listening, or speaking. They bring their own personalities, strengths, weaknesses, and learning styles to the class.

We don't want our better students to be held up by the weaker ones, or the weaker ones to feel intimidated by the better ones. We may need to arrange pairs and groups differently for different kinds of activities, sometimes putting weaker and stronger students in different groups, sometimes mixing weaker and stronger students (in the hope the stronger ones will encourage and help the weaker ones), and sometimes giving students different tasks according to their strengths and weaknesses. There are no hard and fast rules about what to do – we make our decisions based on our knowledge of each class and the individuals within it. This can be hard to do in a very large class, particularly if it meets only once a week. We may have to just hope for the best when arranging groups. Mistakes are sure to happen: Weaker students may not be able to cope, and stronger students may get bored.

- Vary the way you pair your students – sometimes put weaker and stronger students together; sometimes group students with others of the same ability.

Different ages

Younger, immature students may find working together gives them a chance to misbehave when not supervised. Older students may fear losing face by making mistakes and lack the confidence to express themselves in less than perfect English. They may also have preconceptions about the "right way to learn."

Students may need training in the methods used in a student-centered classroom. If we're going to ask them to work together, we need to explain why this is desirable and how they can benefit from this – and why the alternative

teacher-focused lesson isn't as effective. We can't assume that students will share our beliefs and try to impose those beliefs on them. Some younger students may need stricter handling. Students who are unused to autonomy may need to be introduced to new methods gradually.

- Explain to students the benefits of group work and why the teacher-focused alternative isn't as effective.
- Introduce methods gradually for more experienced students who are unused to autonomy.

Monolingual classes

In a multilingual English class, where all students do not share a common native language, students are unlikely to speak in their native language – provided that pairs or groups are arranged in such a way that each group is multilingual. (But we may need to separate inconsiderate same-language students who don't speak English together.) In a monolingual class, students may be more tempted to speak in their common native language rather than in English when working together in pairs or groups.

We need to persuade students that they will benefit from speaking English in their English class, which may be their only chance to speak English. We may also need to persuade them that, yes, they really do have enough knowledge to be able to carry on a conversation in English. We need to make sure that the tasks are within their capabilities, and to give them adequate preparation. (See Preparation on page 26.)

Despite our efforts, some groups may disregard our persuasion and speak English only when we are nearby, reverting to their native language when unsupervised. It's tempting to ignore such groups and think that they don't know what's good for them or that they don't deserve our attention. But it may be that it's just one member of the group who's leading the others, who would like to speak in English but are less assertive. It's important that all the groups speak English, not just the more motivated ones. (See "Only English!" on page 22.)

- Remind students that your class may be their only opportunity to speak English.
- Make sure students have adequate preparation for each task.
- Make sure all groups speak English.

Pairs or groups or whole class?

When should students work together in pairs? When should they be in groups or work together as a whole class? How many students should there be in a small group? Do pairs always have to be two students working together?

In a pair, the atmosphere tends to more protective and private than in a group. Students often feel less inhibited in a pair, and they can talk about more personal feelings or experiences than they would even in a small group. Pairs seem to be more conducive to cooperation and collaboration, while groups tend to be more conducive to (friendly) disagreement and discussion. A lively discussion often depends on an exchange of different ideas and a certain amount of conflict – if everyone agrees with everyone, there may not be much of a discussion!

Talkative students who are full of ideas may work better in groups of three. Less talkative students may do better in groups of four or five, but it may be difficult for students in a larger group to get close enough to one another to converse comfortably. Usually the maximum comfortable size for a group is five, and the ideal size is three.

The size of groups directly influences the amount of possible "talking time" each student has: In a pair, each student can talk for about half the time; in a group of three, for about a third of the time; in a group of four, for about a quarter of the time, and so on. But in a larger group, there may be more ideas flowing, more different opinions, and a more lively discussion – though in a larger group some students will participate less because they are less confident, or have less to say.

In a pair, of course, there'll usually be two students, except when an odd number of students are divided into pairs and there will have to be at least one group of three. But there are situations where "pairs of three" are preferable to pairs of two. If a particular class contains students who are reticent or lacking in confidence, a pair of three can often stimulate a better exchange of ideas than two students would on their own. Another option is to have two students doing the talking while a third listens and takes notes for feedback later – usually when students are working together, the only feedback they get is from us, picked up from our monitoring.

Sometimes, to build confidence, we may want to start students off in even numbers of pairs and combine the pairs into groups later. Students prepare and rehearse their ideas in pairs, then share them in a group.

Besides the times when teacher-led activities are taking place (preparation, follow-up, Q&A, etc.), there may be times when the whole class may want to be involved together. This may be after a group discussion where each group can report on their discussion, mentioning the most interesting or amusing points that were made. In a large class this could go on and on, so we would only ask a few groups to report! Or it could simply be the continuation of a

discussion as whole class for a few minutes, but self-assured students are more likely to contribute when the whole class is listening.

- Put talkative students in groups of three and less talkative students in groups of four or five.
- Stimulate a better exchange of ideas by putting shy students in groups of three rather than in pairs.
- Sometimes have two students talk while a third listens and takes notes, then have the third provide feedback at the end of the conversation.

Seating

In the perfect classroom, students would have swivel chairs on wheels, so that they could quickly and comfortably change position to face each other for pair work, turn around the other way to form a different pair, and turn around to face the teacher whenever necessary, or move into a full circle for a whole-class discussion! But, of course, in reality most classrooms have furniture that isn't easily moveable; sometimes students have to sit in rows in a lecture room, with seats facing the front. Real classrooms are often crowded.

But even if we can't move the furniture, the students can move! For pair work, students sitting side-by-side can move their upper bodies to face each other. Sometimes a person in the row behind may be more accessible than the person beside: The one in front can turn around, sitting backward to face the one behind. With groups of three sitting in row, the middle student can move back slightly, so that the ones on the left and right can see each other. Groups of four may be less comfortable because two of them will have to move back, but groups of four could consist of two students from the row in front and two from the row behind – then they can all see one another.

It's also important that all the pairs or groups are accessible to us as we go around the class while they're working together. We need to be able to monitor all the pairs and groups. If the rows are very long, the students in the middle may be too far from the aisles for us to get near them. Students in the middle need the teacher's attention, too! The only way around this is to rearrange the class regularly so that those students usually in the middle of a row can sometimes be on the aisle.

- Rearrange your students regularly if your class is composed of long rows, making sure that those in the middle sometimes sit on the outside.
- Think creatively about seating arrangements to ensure students can speak comfortably.

Different personalities

Every student is an individual, and some people are more outgoing than others, more dominant than others, and more opinionated or more imaginative than others. A class full of lively, outgoing, opinionated, and imaginative students would be a joy to deal with, but the reality is usually different! Sometimes one student dominates a group, doing most of the talking, while the others just sit and listen to him or her, getting bored or feeling frustrated because they can't get a word in edgewise, or because the dominant student keeps interrupting them. In other cases, one student in a group may not join in with the others and is happy to be a "passenger" and let the others lead the group and do all the talking.

Rearranging groups regularly can help here: Weaker and shyer students shouldn't always be with the same partners. People get stuck in their habits, and it's hard to change them when you're always with the same people. New experiences with different partners can help such students to develop more confidence. It won't happen suddenly, however.

If there are several groups, each dominated by one student, it may be worth removing the dominant ones from each group and putting them together – and let them try to dominate each other! This leaves the less assertive students to talk with one another uninterrupted. On the other hand, these dominant students, whose English may be better or who are simply more confident, can be great assets. Sometimes (but certainly not always) they can be "team leaders." We can ask them to make sure everyone in their group gets an equal chance to speak, to chair the discussions and be responsible for reporting back to the whole class afterward. We have to be careful that this doesn't undermine the other group members or make them feel inadequate. Different students should be team leaders at different times.

Some students may have no strong opinions, may not want to express disagreement, or may lack the confidence to lose face by talking in less than perfect English. They may not want to talk much. In a pair, it may be harder for one of them to keep quiet, but if both students feel like this, neither will have much to say. Students need to be taught techniques to bring out others and encourage them to say more or expand on their ideas – for example, with follow-up questions such as *Why do you think that? Can you give me an example?* or encouraging phrases such as *Tell me some more. Go on. That's interesting.*

- Pair weak or shy students with a variety of partners to help them develop confidence.
- Make dominant students "team leaders," but make sure to switch team leaders so other students don't feel left out.
- Teach your students techniques to bring out others and encourage them to say more or expand on their ideas, specifically with follow-up questions.

Best friends and relative strangers

"I don't want to work with someone I don't like. Or with someone who's weaker than me. Or with someone who's much better than me. Or someone I don't know. I want to work with my friend all the time." Most students prefer to work with friends or with people they get along well with, which is understandable. They may resent being paired with people they don't know, or with those who have weaker English skills.

Clearly, groups that get along well and work well together are going to be more congenial and effective than groups that dislike or mistrust each other. But if students select the groups themselves, less popular or proficient students may be excluded from every group. We may need to manage this carefully and tactfully.

Once students have become accustomed to working together, they can select their own partners. If students always sit in the same places in every lesson, those pairs and groups may always be the same and no time will be wasted deciding who's going to work with whom – unless some students are absent. But those regular pairs and groups might get bored with one another and need perking up with new ideas. The class needs to be reseated on a regular basis so that students aren't always talking with the same partners.

When best friends are always together, they may know each other so well that they have nothing much to say to each other. In a discussion they may know each other's views or agree on most things. When talking about experiences (*Talk about a great meal you remember,* or *What's your favorite movie?*) they already know all about the other's experiences, perhaps even shared them. Students who know each other less well are more likely to have differences of opinion, which they may have to justify, and experiences that the other partners don't already know about. They have more to share because they don't already know much about each other.

We should encourage students to be tolerant and inclusive of everyone in the class, to cooperate with everyone, and not to exclude people with different tastes or abilities. A stranger is just a friend waiting to happen! Moreover, when they go out into the real world, students won't be speaking to their friends in English. They'll be speaking to people from other countries who begin as strangers, but might become colleagues or even friends!

- Reseat the class on a regular basis so that students don't always have the same partners.
- Encourage students to be tolerant and inclusive of everyone in class.

Noisy classes

A classroom full of students all talking at once can make a lot of noise. It's wonderful that they're all talking in English, we say to ourselves. But all this noise may disturb other classes in adjacent rooms, and may even be unpleasant for our own students.

The best way to encourage students to talk softly is to make sure they're sitting really close together — and facing each other. It's hard to talk loudly when you're close to someone and when you can see their reactions. Most people feel uncomfortable if their interlocutor starts talking loudly, and their reaction is to move away or to ask them to talk more quietly. With a very large class, it may be necessary for students to sit unusually close when they're working together, and we need to explain why this is necessary. Different cultures feel more or less comfortable at different distances, so it may not be easy for everyone to do this.

> ▪ Seat students close together to encourage them to talk softly.

Timing

How long will an activity take? Should we allow each activity to go on until students run out of steam? But different groups will run out of steam at different times. Some groups will finish quickly, while others will take longer and feel frustrated if they are interrupted before they have finished. If the time is open-ended, most students will try to finish quickly (for fear of running out of time) and won't have a long, satisfying conversation.

It's better for students to be given a time limit, so that they can pace themselves and deal with questions in more depth. Knowing how long they have, students will feel they can say more and share their ideas and opinions in a more relaxed way. A time limit encourages students to take their time, and in doing so, have a stimulating exchange of views as they explore a topic in depth and share ideas.

Judging exactly how long this time limit should be depends on how much time is available and how talkative a particular class is. When we say *You have three minutes for this,* we must be reasonably accurate. A digital clock or the timer on a cell phone are good for keeping time, or even a kitchen timer that beeps when the time is up. It's helpful to warn students when their time is nearly up, so that they can finish up their activity satisfactorily.

We need to be flexible, of course. If students aren't enjoying a particular activity or don't have much to say, we may decide to stop them early. If they're enjoying it and have plenty to say, we'll offer them more time. Generally, it's better to err on the side of longer time rather than shorter time because this will encourage students to say more. Having a longer time limit also gives

students a few moments to reflect in silence and prepare themselves before they begin their conversations.

Some groups will finish early and wonder what to do. In a discussion, they can go back to an earlier question and deal with it again. In a role play they can switch roles and try it again. Or they can prepare questions to ask the teacher afterward.

- Give students a time limit so they can pace themselves and deal with questions in depth.
- Use a timer and give students a warning when time is almost up.
- Be flexible – if students are enjoying an activity, let them prolong it. If an activity isn't going well, it's fine to cut it short.

3 | *Motivation*

High-interest topics

If students are introduced to topics that interest them, they're more likely to be motivated. But of course not everybody is equally interested in the same topics. Topics like Vacations, Food, Entertainment, and Relationships tend to interest most students, but topics like Art, Literature, Sports, and Cars may not interest some students. Knitting, Astronomy, Gardening, and Swimming probably won't interest many students – although someone may have a passion for such a topic and want to share it with everyone.

We can't interest all students all the time, but with each topic we need to engage as many as possible. Even an apparently high-interest topic like Foreign Travel may not necessarily be relevant to students who have never traveled to another country, and whose circumstances make it unlikely they ever will. Some topics may not be all that interesting or relevant for students at the moment; but, if they want to be able to participate in a wide range of conversation in the future, they may need to explore some less fascinating topics. The more popular topics are usually covered at every level of an English course, which means that if we want to deal with the same topics again, we need to introduce new angles rather than discuss the same questions.

But interest and enthusiasm aren't generated by a topic itself, they're generated by the students themselves as they discover more about the topic and their knowledge of and views on the topic. Personal experiences of a topic are always more interesting than general knowledge about it.

- Don't assume that an apparently popular topic will automatically interest everyone.
- Expect different students to be interested in different topics.
- Help students to discover new aspects of popular topics they've discussed previously.

Personalization

One of the most rewarding aspects of a student-centered language lesson, which sets it apart from lessons in other subjects, is sharing. Students have a chance to talk about personal feelings and private experiences they'd be unlikely to share in other lessons – or even in their everyday lives. English lessons give students chances to step back, reflect, find out about other people, and even share their

secrets. This can be quite exciting, and sometimes you even feel the hair on the back your neck standing up when you've shared something very personal – and done this in English!

Working together, students share their experiences, ideas, and opinions. Sharing is a two-way process: explaining to others and listening to them, and reacting to them. Students need to be armed with suitable ways of reacting to one another in English. Smiles, laughter, and supportive body language are important, but they also need to know expressions like these:

> *Great idea!*
> *Well done!*
> *Wow, that's really funny!*
> *That's amazing!*

- Remind students that personal experiences are more interesting to discuss than generalizations.
- Sharing experiences involves listening carefully and reacting to your conversation partner – and expressing feelings.

Developing confidence

A quiet classroom full of whispering or silent students is worrying. What's wrong? We chose a great topic for discussion, and there are some really provocative questions to ask one another, but nobody's talking. They're staring at their books looking puzzled or embarrassed. How can we get them to talk? What language are they whispering in?

Students who have never worked together before may need a lot of support and encouragement to begin with. Thorough preparation, even over-preparation, is called for. Students may need to rehearse conversations, and learning model dialogs may help them to feel more confident.

All students need to feel ready before they can work together with confidence, and this confidence will grow little by little as students successfully share ideas and experiences when they do work together. This may start in a very simple way with, for example, students talking about thought-provoking pictures in their textbook or discussing specific questions. Questions are only the starting point for a discussion, and they need to be open-ended enough to stimulate an exchange of ideas. Questions such as *Do you enjoy going to the movies?* are not very stimulating because some students may just say *Yes!* and leave it there. By contrast, *Why do you enjoy going to the movies?* is a much more productive question because it encourages students to be creative.

Speaking in English for two minutes can be a challenging, scary experience for some students. Working together makes this less scary, particularly if students are helping and supporting one another. And the feeling of

having achieved something ("We spoke in English for two minutes!") is very motivating.

Some students feel more comfortable when they can take their time. The pressure of a conversation in English may lead them to panic. Here, a different kind of preparation can help: Making notes before students start and preparing what they'll say can be less scary than thinking on their feet and trying to think of what to say and how to say it.

Failure is demoralizing, success is motivating. Having fun as they use English experimentally in class and succeeding in communicating with one another is a rewarding experience for students. The more successful the activities they participate in, the more confident students will become. Such confidence can only be built by having students work together, so that when they have to talk with strangers in English in real life, they'll feel less scared and they'll be more prepared for real conversations.

- Have diffident students learn model dialogs and rehearse conversations to help them prepare for their own conversations.
- Use open-ended questions in a discussion to encourage students to avoid yes/no answers and be more creative.
- Give students time to reflect for a few moments before starting a conversation – and perhaps make brief notes.

Overcoming resistance

In any class, some students are usually less motivated than others, and unmotivated students are less likely to join in wholeheartedly when asked to work together in English. They may prefer to chat together in their native language instead of in English. We can rearrange groups to separate those students, but their attitude might spread to others who are in contact with them. But what if *many* of the students don't want to work together in English? What if they prefer to sit back and expect us to "teach" them English? How can we overcome their resistance?

We may need to spend time persuading students that working together is a good idea and much more enjoyable than sitting and listening. Most of the arguments in favor of a student-centered approach have been given in Chapter 1, and students may need to be reminded of them periodically. In the short term, working together is going to be fun. In the long term, assuming that most students will at one time in their future lives need to communicate in English, the only way to prepare for participating in real conversations is by simulating real conversations in class with one another.

Often, students who support the idea of working together are less vociferous than opponents and critics – but, they may be a silent majority, and we shouldn't listen only to the louder, more articulate students. Engaging the whole class in a discussion about the student-centered approach will enable students who are convinced of the benefits to persuade their classmates. Such a discussion could begin with students working in groups – even speaking in their native language – and then continuing the discussion with the whole class.

- Discuss the benefits of pair and group work with the whole class.
- Remind the class that working together is more enjoyable than just sitting and listening.
- Emphasize that working together is the only way to prepare for conversations in the real world.

Making progress

If success increases motivation, lack of success reduces it. Sometimes students who started out very enthusiastic about learning English become less enthusiastic if they suspect that they're not making any progress. They may feel they're just chatting to each other using what they already know, and not learning anything new. Even if we know that students are making a lot of progress in their communication skills, it may be hard to convince them that they are improving.

We may need to encourage students to experiment and take risks and not rest on their laurels or be satisfied with their current skills level. They may need to encourage and challenge one another while working together, and again, some useful expressions can help students do this:

Just a moment, let me think.
Is there another way of saying that?
Is there a better word for that?
Another way of saying that is . . .

Everyone should be encouraged to ask questions. The Q&A stage after an activity is an extremely valuable part of the lesson. During Q&A, we can respond to students' needs and problems, rather than anticipating them as we might usually do. Some students may feel shy about asking questions in front of the whole class, and may prefer to ask us privately or while we're monitoring their group.

We may need to encourage students to pause from time to time to evaluate what they've been saying and consider how it could be improved by using more "advanced" vocabulary or less "elementary" grammatical structures. During the feedback stage, we could address this matter and brainstorm ideas

with the whole class. Then we could ask everyone to try the same activity again to incorporate the ideas. The repeated activity is almost sure to go better – and students will feel that they've made progress. It's a good idea to use this "do it again" technique regularly, particularly at higher levels.

We should ensure that students receive an input of "new words" in every lesson. These may be lexical items relating to the topic of the lesson, or phrases and expressions to use in conversations. Learning more vocabulary helps students to become more fluent – the more words you know, the easier it is to express yourself. Learning new vocabulary also helps students feel that they're learning new things and not relying only on previous knowledge. If we write about ten new words on the board by the end of each lesson, students can make notes and in due course try to use them in their conversations.

Another way we can show students they have improved is to make a recording of them doing an activity at the start of the course – using a camcorder rather than a voice recorder is more exciting! Then some time later, we can ask students to do the same activity, and record them again. Play back the two versions: Have they improved? (Hopefully, yes!)

- Encourage students to ask questions after each activity.
- Persuade students to experiment with language and not play it safe during their conversations.
- Put relevant, new vocabulary on the board as it comes up during class so that students can incorporate it into their own conversations.
- Brainstorm ideas with the class about how to use more advanced structures and vocabulary, and then sometimes repeat activities incorporating the suggestions.
- Make a recording of students doing the same activity at the start of the course and the end to show progress.

4 | *Fluency and Accuracy*

What is fluency? Why is it important?

Fluency doesn't mean speaking really fast without hesitating. It's being able to express yourself despite the gaps in your knowledge, despite the mistakes you're making, despite not knowing all the vocabulary you might need. It means hesitating in such a way that others keep listening and wait for you to continue, rather than finishing your sentences for you. Even native speakers make mistakes, can't think of exactly the right words some of the time, and may need to work on their fluency skills. The opposite of fluency is being tongue-tied and embarrassed when speaking English – or not speaking at all. Fluency goes hand in hand with confidence, and it takes time to develop.

In writing, you can pause after each word while you think of the next word you want to write. But you can't do this in a conversation. You have to keep talking or people will get tired of waiting and stop listening to you. Fluency means using simple words to express meaning, even though longer words might be more descriptive. Fluency means speaking slowly and clearly, not speaking fast and unclearly. Fluency depends on knowing more vocabulary and on confidence – and on not worrying about losing face by making mistakes. It also involves using hesitation expressions like *uh, um, well,* or *you know* to gain thinking time, and students may need to learn to use them.

Another component of fluency is being able to articulate easily and comprehensively. Students need to learn to say whole phrases as well as individual words and get their tongues around phrases so that it's not too much of a strain to say them. Pronunciation practice is an essential way of helping students to become more fluent. (See Pronunciation practice on page 23.) They may need to learn to avoid words and phrases they find particularly difficult to say aloud and use alternate phrases that are easier to say. For example, if students find it hard to pronounce phrases like *particularly difficult* or *relatively straightforward,* there may be alternative phrases that are easier to pronounce!

- Explain to students that fluency is being able to express yourself despite not knowing all the vocabulary you need, and despite making mistakes.
- Encourage students to learn whole phrases, not just individual words.
- Practice pronunciation so students can speak with more confidence.
- Help students learn hesitation expressions to gain thinking time.

Fluency versus accuracy

Accuracy means not making too many mistakes. We certainly want our students to become more fluent, but we also want them to become more accurate. An overconfident, inaccurate speaker can be an irritating companion, though preferable to a silent one!

Sometimes during a lesson we'll do work, such as grammar explanations and exercises, to help students speak more accurately. We'll correct mistakes they make, and we'll encourage them to correct themselves.

But students can't be expected to express themselves fluently without making mistakes at the same time. Expressing an idea in English so that others in the group understand it and react to it is a more satisfying achievement than saying a sentence with no mistakes in it. As students become more adept at expressing themselves fluently, they'll probably make more mistakes because they'll be stretching their English to its limits and focusing on communication, not grammar.

But mistakes do matter. Part of our job is to help students make fewer of them.

- Remind students that making some mistakes is a natural part of learning a language.
- Discourage students from worrying about making mistakes as they try to communicate in English.

Errors and correction

When students are working together and trying to communicate with one another, their minds are focused on the content of what they're saying, not on the language system. When students are working together, they're out of our earshot most of the time. Only when we get closer can we hear what they're saying and how they're saying it. If they're speaking together in English, we may be really pleased, even though they're making lots of mistakes.

If we interrupt and correct students in mid-conversation while they're trying to express complex ideas or personal information, they may feel resentful or belittled. "This is me you're correcting and disapproving of, not my English." And this may discourage students from speaking for fear of being corrected.

If we ignore the mistakes we hear students making, they may start to believe that mistakes don't matter at all and develop a style of speaking in incorrect English that is very difficult to improve. We need to take notes while we are monitoring students so that we can give them feedback afterward.

Feedback is an essential part of every lesson, which is why monitoring students while they're working together is so important. If we're going to take notes on students' mistakes to point out to them afterward, we need to do this unobtrusively but formally – preferably in a (nice) notebook devoted to each particular class, so that we have a permanent record of these notes.

We also need to be systematic in our correction strategies. Pointing out lots of unrelated mistakes can lead to confusion or dismay. Instead, it's more helpful to focus on different kinds of errors in different lessons: modal verbs in one lesson, tenses in another, articles in another, and so on. Or we can focus on vocabulary or pronunciation mistakes – on communication problems such as misuse or under-use of conversational gambits. Grouping errors into different types is much more helpful than pointing out errors at random because it provides a theme to the feedback, and students can feel they're being helped to improve specific aspects of their accuracy. It's more motivating to look forward to fewer mistakes than back at the mistakes that are still being made.

Some very confident students can be corrected in mid-conversation without undermining their confidence, and they may be grateful for our interruptions. Some more advanced students, too, may welcome correction. But we need to tread warily because many students find correction threatening – and some students who smile and thank us for a correction may only be feigning gratitude.

But what do we do when some pairs produce conversations like this?

Woman she sad. No?
        – Yes, why she sad?
She lost a money?
        – Yes, I think.

Well, effective communication seems to be taking place, but the level of English is very basic. As a first effort from a pair of high beginners it's not all that bad – at least it's in English! But these students needed more preparation before they began, and they also need correction and further explanation of question structures. (Questions and answers are fundamental when students are working together. Students need to be able to form questions reasonably correctly.)

What if we overhear this conversation?

The woman in the photo looks quite sad.
        – Huh?
She's sad, why do you think she's sad?
        – ?
I think she's sad because she lost her money.
        – Yes.

These students are mismatched. The talkative student is soon going to lose patience and give up trying. We'd need to make sure these students aren't paired up again, though it's never going to be possible to match up perfectly suited pairs.

- Treat mistakes as a valuable resource from which students can learn.
- Take notes while monitoring so you can point out mistakes afterward.
- Don't correct students while they're trying to communicate ideas in case you discourage or intimidate them.
- Keep notes on student conversations in a formal notebook so you have a permanent record of the class' performance.
- Focus systematically on different categories of mistakes in each lesson; don't try to point out all the mistakes you've heard.

Sustaining a conversation

Sometimes students begin working together with enthusiasm but then quickly run out of steam. This may be because they've exhausted the topic and don't have any relevant opinions or experiences to share. Or it may be because they lack the vocabulary to talk about the topic in greater depth. Meanwhile, other groups have plenty to say and are having a lively conversation, making the now-silent groups feel inadequate.

Establishing a time limit is an important factor here: Students who know they have, say, three minutes for a discussion soon learn to pace themselves and deal with the questions in depth, making sure each group member has an equal amount of time to speak. The composition of groups is also a factor: A group of students that gives up easily is more likely to stop talking sooner than a group with a strong, resourceful leader.

We need to encourage all students to be resourceful. We may need to give them advice:

- Don't start too soon – take a few moments to gather your thoughts and consider what you're going to say. Perhaps make notes.
- Deal with the more interesting questions in greater depth.
- Skip over less interesting questions and go back over them later if there's time.
- If necessary, take a break for a moment to gather your thoughts before continuing.
- Ask for help if you're stuck.
- Try to give personal examples rather than attempt to discuss global issues.
- Listen to each other's ideas and react to them. Don't concentrate only on expressing your own point of view.

- Set a time limit so students know how much time is available for them to talk.
- Encourage groups to be resourceful and spend more time on the most interesting questions.

"Only English!"

Sometimes students keep switching from their native language to English and back again. It's hard for them to become more fluent if this happens too often. Students may switch when their English isn't adequate for the ideas they want to express. Sometimes their enjoyment of an activity may make them switch – they really want to say something and it's frustrating trying to do it in English.

When lost for words, students may need to ask us for help or use a dictionary, or we may need to interrupt the whole class and offer vocabulary help for everyone. Our own explanations should be in English, even if a quick translation may be easier – we have to observe the "Only English" rule, too!

When we overhear too many students speaking in their native language, we may need to interrupt everyone and help them express the ideas in English. Have students start the activity again from the beginning, but this time ask them to try to stick to English all the time. This may be a difficult challenge, but it's something everyone should aim for.

An effective way of ensuring that an English-only environment is maintained is by making sure that students know the necessary "classroom language" to manage their own group activities in English. This "classroom language" includes simple expressions like:

You start.   *Do you have a pencil?*
What does this mean?   *What are we supposed to do?*
After you.   *I'm not quite ready.*
Let's ask the teacher.   *I didn't hear what you said.*
OK, let's start.   *Are you ready?*
We're done. What should we do now?

Using classroom language like this to help students manage themselves within their groups creates an English-only framework for the harder tasks of expressing ideas in English. Students should learn such expressions by heart so that using them becomes second nature. They also need to be able to pronounce them easily and comfortably.

- Use only English when talking to students in class.
- Learning "classroom English" will help students speak in English all the time.
- If students aren't speaking English when working together, interrupt and ask them to start the conversation again using only English.

Pronunciation practice

All too often after the beginner level, we neglect pronunciation. This may be because there are more exciting things for students to learn and practice. It may also be because students are unaware of their pronunciation problems when working together, particularly in monolingual classes where all students share the same accent and mispronunciations. Good pronunciation is important for intelligibility.

Teacher-led "Repeat after me" practice is valuable. Some students may feel that repeating in chorus is childish and beneath them, but it's an effective way of helping them to get their tongues around new phrases and expressions so that they can say them easily and comfortably. A question like *What are we supposed to do?* needs be mastered as a whole phrase, not as six separate words. It may take several repetitions for students to manage this.

Repeating phrases in chorus helps students to copy the rhythm of each phrase and say it aloud again and again without inhibition. Sometimes we can divide the class into two "teams" (left side and right side, for example), with each team saying the phrase as the others listen to them and how they say it, particularly their tone of voice – it's hard to listen when you're speaking yourself.

With phrases or expressions such as *That's a good idea!* and *Yes, I agree with you!*, students need practice saying them with enthusiasm or gusto,

which is much easier to do when "disguised" by surrounding voices. Then, when working together, students will be ready to use the expressions in real conversations.

- Use "Repeat after me" practice so that students learn to say new phrases and expressions easily and comfortably.
- Divide the class into two "teams" so that one team can listen to how the other team says a phrase and then try saying it themselves.

5 | *Teacher as Facilitator*

Teacher's role versus student's role

Students can't be "taught" – they can only be helped to learn. In a student-centered classroom, our role is to help and encourage students to develop their skills, but without relinquishing our more traditional role as a source of information, advice, and knowledge. In a student-centered classroom, the teacher and students are a team working together. Together our role is to make sure everyone benefits from the lesson, supporting one another.

At different times in a lesson, our role may change as the lesson moves from teacher-led to student-centered and back again. We're responsible for helping students work independently, monitoring them while they're working together, and giving them feedback afterward. In a whole-class activity, students and the teacher interact, and students accept the authority of the teacher as their manager. When working together, students will be responsible for their own behavior and learning while the teacher walks around the classroom monitoring.

At first, some students may be too dependent on us and expect to be helped, corrected, and encouraged all the time. To begin with, we can put them into groups with less teacher-dependent students, and not pair them up with equally diffident students. It may take some time before they become more independent.

As students become more independent and resourceful, they'll stop thinking "I don't know the right word, so I can't say what I want to say" but rather "I don't know exactly the right words, but I'll try to find other words to say what I mean." When in doubt, they'll ask one another for ideas and vocabulary before asking the teacher. They can also help one another by using dictionaries in class and looking up words. But they'll also ask "public" questions – questions directed to the whole class – so that everyone can benefit from hearing the answers.

It may be hard for us to answer every question that comes up. We may feel uncomfortable about letting our students down by not knowing enough, or about losing their respect. But we can't know everything, and students shouldn't expect us to. When asked a question we can't answer, it's best to say, "That's a good question. I've no idea of the answer. I'll find out for you and let you know next time." We then make a note of the question in our class notebook so that we can research the answer before the next lesson. In a more advanced class, we can say, "Good question! Does anyone know the answer? (Someone might!)

- Pair teacher-dependent students with more independent students.
- Encourage students in groups to ask questions and help one another.
- If students ask questions you can't answer, make a note, and give them the answers in the next lesson.

Preparation

Before students begin working together, we need to help prepare them. Besides introducing relevant vocabulary and useful phrases (and practicing saying them), we need to make sure they know exactly what they're supposed to be doing and why, as well as how long they have for the activity.

Less confident students may need to be shown how to begin the activity. We can demonstrate to the class how the conversation might go, using one of our more confident students as our partner while the others watch and listen. Or we might act out the conversation pretending to be two people, which can be amusing.

Before students actually start talking in their pairs or groups, it may be helpful for them to be silent for a few moments while they plan what they might say and perhaps make some notes to help them to remember these ideas. This delay can often lead to a much more interesting discussion than just starting to talk and seeing what happens.

We may need to remind insecure students that the activity isn't a test, it's their chance to practice. Speaking English is more important than getting through all the discussion questions: It's not a race, so they can take their time. It doesn't matter if they don't get to the end.

- Show less confident students how to begin the activity.
- Demonstrate a conversation in front of the class, using a confident student as your partner.
- Act out a conversation yourself, playing both roles.
- Have students prepare talking points before beginning their conversations.
- Remind students that this is practice, not a test.

Monitoring

While students are working together, they're in control of their learning. But we'll be busy moving around the class listening to different groups. We may

choose to sit with or stand beside a group for a few moments, or listen in more discreetly, trying not to inhibit students by our proximity.

Sometimes we may overhear a pair or group speaking their native language and need to remind them firmly of the "Only English" rule. We may need to join a group that needs extra help or encouragement and guide them for a few moments.

We'll usually overhear students making all kinds of mistakes. Normally, we won't correct these on the spot, but take notes for feedback later. (See Errors and correction on page 19.)

We'll also be keeping an eye on the clock or timer and warn everyone when the time limit is nearly up. When time is up, we'll ask students if they need a little more time. Sometimes it may be hard to stop more enthusiastic students from speaking, so an easily audible signal like a bell may be more effective than clapping hands or shouting! (See Timing on page 11.)

- Try to listen to as many groups as possible in each lesson.
- Answer questions, and encourage students who need extra help.
- Take notes for feedback in the follow-up session later.

Follow-up

When time is up and everyone has stopped talking, we're back in control. First have a Q&A session. Deal with any questions students may have about vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or other topics. Give students feedback on their "performance" by mentioning some mistakes that were overheard and asking the whole class to suggest corrections.

Corrections should be viewed as positive and ways to improve or do better in the future. And we shouldn't forget to be encouraging and congratulate everyone by saying, "*Well done, everyone!*"

Sometimes it may be tempting to skip the follow-up stage when time is short or if there's another enjoyable activity to do next. But we should always leave time for Q&A. If nobody has anything to ask when you say, *"Any questions?"* move on to the next activity!

- Allow time for Q&A after each activity to deal with students' questions on vocabulary, pronunciation, grammar, or other topics.
- Give feedback on mistakes overheard during conversations.
- Encourage and praise students – don't just correct them!

6 *Different Kinds of Activities*

Some activities, like discussion and role play, are quite clearly suitable as working-together activities. Others, such as writing tasks or multiple-choice and fill-the-blank exercises, may not seem suitable at first glance, but they may be just as effective and enjoyable when done in pairs or groups. Brainstorming and comparing answers can lead to very lively discussions, but they have to be in English, and we may have to convince students that this is desirable.

In this chapter, we'll look at some activity examples and how they work.

Reading

Reading a text is something people prefer to do on their own, without interruptions, and at their own speed if possible, looking up unfamiliar words in a dictionary from time to time. To save time in class, we may ask students to read the text before the lesson. If there are comprehension questions, we may ask them to do those at home, too.

But reading together in class can be enjoyable, with students helping one another to understand and sharing reactions. Even multiple-choice questions can be the basis for discussion in pairs. It's much more interesting for students to discuss their answers than to just be told the answers.

Here's an example of the kind of conversation students might have:

What answer do you have for number 5?
  – Number 5? I think it's C.
I think it could be A.
  – Why do you think that?
Well, it says here in the fourth paragraph, "When the women had finished . . ."
  – Oh, yes I see. But it also says this, look: "But in spite of this . . ."

A different kind of reading task with follow-up questions can require that students work together and have two kinds of discussions: one about the answers and one about the information they've just found out. In this example from a textbook unit on transportation, students are going to read a text about congestion charging – the practice in some cities of charging motorists fees or tolls for driving in the most congested areas during peak business hours:

Pair work Find the answers to these questions in the text:

1. When do you have to pay to drive in Central London?
2. How much do you have to pay?
3. How many times can you enter the charging zone in the same day?
4. How do they know your car is in the zone?
5. What if you don't pay the congestion charge?

The students find the answers in the text and try to settle disagreements by discussing them. Then they talk about their reactions to the text in the first two questions, and move beyond the text in the last two questions:

Pair work Discuss these questions:

• What are the advantages of the scheme?
• What do you see as the disadvantages?
• Could a similar scheme work in your town or city?
• How safe is it to ride a bike in your city?

This in turn leads on to a wider discussion in small groups about different ways of dealing with traffic problems: bicycle lanes, bus lanes, improved public transportation, and so on – all based on the reading text.

- ▪ Have pairs discuss their answers to reading comprehension questions – it can often spark lively conversation.
- ▪ Have groups discuss their reactions to a reading text and share relevant personal experiences.

Listening

Listening is also something people usually do as an individual activity. Comprehension tasks or questions help students understand better, but doing such tasks alone can make them feel isolated, especially when they don't understand the content of the conversation too well.

A typical listening exercise may be done in class in several stages. Some are student-centered, and some not.

1. Students look at the questions and try to guess some of the answers, maybe penciling them in.
2. Students listen to the recording and write in the answers.

3. In pairs, students compare their answers. Some they'll agree on. Some neither of them will get. Some answers they'll disagree about and a short discussion may ensue where they try to convince one another.

4. To settle the arguments and give everyone a chance to get the answers they missed, we play the recording again.

5. Again, students compare answers. Further discussion may ensue.

6. Arguments started in step 5 may make it necessary to play the recording yet again.

7. The whole class discusses the answers – and we deal with any questions that come up.

8. If there's time, we play the recording for the last time. Students listen, alone with eyes closed to shut out distractions, feeling pleased that they now understand most or even all of the conversation.

9. Q&A if anyone has any questions.

There may be issues raised in the conversation that lead to a discussion activity. In the following example, the students have listened to three people talking about their vacations:

Pair work Discuss these questions:
- Have you had a vacation like Charlie's, Julia's, or Michael's? What happened?
- What did you do on your last vacation?
- What's the best vacation you've ever had?

  ▪ Have pairs compare their answers to the listening tasks.
  ▪ Follow with a group discussion about what they've heard.

Discussions and sharing ideas

Discussions are typical of any student-centered classroom. The best discussions involve students talking about personal experiences and giving opinions. Discussions work best in pairs or small groups because then more people can give their views. In larger groups or in a whole class, once one person has given his or her view, everyone else can only agree or disagree.

A typical discussion may be a simple exchange of views based on pictures, like this from a textbook unit on working for a living:

To start the discussion, we can help by suggesting how the conversation might begin:

> *"She's a construction worker. I'd like working outside. I wouldn't like . . ."*

To encourage students to sustain a conversation, rather than try to get it over quickly, we can say: "You have about two minutes for this." Students will need longer for a more open-ended discussion, such as the following:

And again, to help them start off, we can suggest how the conversation might start:

> *"Have you ever had a job?"*
>> – *"Yes, I had a job last summer in a café. I served customers and . . ."*

Here students may have a lot to say about some questions and less about others. They may want to skip a less interesting question. That's fine, and all part of the design of the questions. If they reach the end too quickly, they can go back to an earlier question and deal with it.

When time is up, the discussion could be continued as a whole-class activity. We could ask a spokesperson for each group to summarize the group's discussion or mention an interesting or amusing point. Or we could simply open up the discussion to everyone.

In the following activity from a textbook unit on transportation and travel, students prepare their ideas in pairs and then join a group to share their ideas.

Then after about five minutes the pairs combine:

> **Join another pair** Explain your travel plans. Which trip sounds better?

- Let everyone know how long their discussions should take.
- Encourage students to spend more time on the questions that interest them most.
- Continue the discussion with the whole class at the end of group work so students can hear other people's ideas.

Role play

Some students feel less inhibited if they have a role to play, and can escape from "being themselves" for a while. Role plays may involve one student playing a tourist/customer/boss, interacting with another student playing a tour guide/sales assistant/post office clerk/employee. Such nonrealistic roles can be problematic for some students, but fun for others.

In the following example from a unit on "Making a good impression," both partners are themselves, but they imagine themselves in a different place. The questions help students decide what to ask – they don't have to be too creative! And the exchange in italics suggests how they can begin the phone call. (An illustration, not shown here, helps to set the scene.)

> **Pair work** Imagine both of you want to meet later. Sit back to back and role-play a phone call. Use these questions and your own ideas.
>
> Where are you?   What are you doing?
> Who are you with?   Where should we meet?
>
> *"Hi, this is Pete. Could I speak to Marc?"*
>   *– "Speaking. Hey, Pete, where are you?"*
> *"I'm still at home. What are you doing?"*

When monitoring students during the role play, we'll be focusing on how they perform the task: Is it a successful phone call? Do they make a good impression? Our feedback to the class will deal with this. After discussing how students can improve their performance, they may wish to try the conversation again, perhaps switching roles.

- Remember that some students feel less inhibited when playing a role, but others may not enjoy pretending to be someone else.

Information gap activities

A lot of communication involves bridging an information gap: You know things I don't know, and I know things you don't know. Often this is hard for students to do naturally in class, either because they might not know enough facts or because everyone knows the same facts. We can simulate the information gap by giving two participants different information, which they have to share.

In the next example from a unit on weather, two students role-play a phone call between friends in different cities. Some questions are suggested to start them off.

Communication task Work in pairs. One of you should look at Task 6, and the other at Task 26. You're going to find out about the weather in two different cities.

Task 6
Imagine you are in London, England. It's 10:00 a.m. Call your friend in Sydney, Australia, and ask about the weather. Ask each other about the weather.

Yesterday morning	warm and sunny
Yesterday afternoon	hot with strong winds
Last night	warm and wet
Earlier this morning	cool and clear
Right now	warmer but cloudy

- What time is it in Sydney now?
- What's the weather like there?
- What was the weather like yesterday?

Task 26
Imagine you are in Sydney, Australia. It's 7:00 p.m. Your friend calls you from London, England. Ask each other about the weather.

Yesterday morning	hot and very sunny
Yesterday afternoon	very rainy
Last night	cool with light rain
Earlier today	warm and windy
Right now	still warm with a pretty sunset

- What time is it in London now?
- What's the weather like there?
- What was the weather like yesterday?

Although it's possible for students to "cheat" by peeking at their partner's information, students quickly see the value of such activities and are willing participants in the game.

- Simulate real conversations (where we can't anticipate what other people will tell us) by giving partners different information that they have to share.
- Discourage students from "cheating" by looking at their partner's information.

Writing tasks

Longer writing tasks are best done as homework; this saves time in class and allows students to spend as long as they need on them. But writing tasks also can be prepared by working together, brainstorming ideas, marshalling your thoughts, and making notes. The actual writing will be done as homework. Then, back in class in groups, students read one another's work, react to it, and perhaps suggest small improvements.

The following is an example from the Teacher's Manual of a textbook that includes a unit on the environment:

1. Ask students to write about one of these ideas for homework:
   - Write about a threat to the environment in your country.
   - Describe life in a zoo or a natural environment from the point of view of an animal who lives there.
2. Discuss the ideas in class before students do the homework.

Here's the very beginning of the next unit:

If you assigned **Writing**, ask students to read one another's work in small groups before giving you their work.

The big advantage of this student-centered approach to writing is that each writer knows who his or her reader will be, and can write to please them. It's personally satisfying, after spending time and effort writing a story or short essay, to have it read by several peers who enjoy reading it. (If the teacher only reads it, the task becomes just an exercise and not a piece of communication.)

- Prepare for writing tasks by having students brainstorm ideas together.
- Have students in groups read one another's work and discuss it. This will give them a real audience for their writing, and an enjoyable outcome!

Encouraging creativity

When in groups or pairs, students can work together without worrying about losing face in front of the whole class when they say something unusual or incorrect. They can experiment with their English and take risks, rather than play it safe. Special activities can help them be more creative.

An example from a high-beginner lesson on "Personal information" follows. At first glance it looks childishly easy. Of course, students all can recite the alphabet (*ABCEFG . . .*), but saying letters in isolation may not be so easy. A short recording of two people starting to do the task in a creative way sets the scene, and shows students how their conversation might begin.

A Listen 🎧 You will hear a short conversation. Then complete the chart with a partner. Be creative!

A as in _address_	J as in _____	S as in _____
B as in _birthday_	K as in _____	T as in _____
C as in _creative_	L as in _____	U as in _____
D as in _____	M as in _____	V as in _____
E as in _____	N as in _____	W as in _____
F as in _____	O as in _____	X as in _____
G as in _____	P as in _____	Y as in _____
H as in _____	Q as in _____	Z as in _____
I as in _____	R as in _____	

Students could, of course, do this in a play-it-safe, pedestrian way (choosing words like *dog, egg,* and *fun*) and consequently regard it as a dull, rather childish exercise. But, treated creatively, it's an activity where even students with limited English proficiency can exchange ideas, challenge one another, and have a lot of fun without feeling their English is inadequate for the task. They can set themselves the challenge of coming up with unusual or long or difficult-to-spell words. They may find that conversations like this can be really satisfying:

Can you think of any words beginning with D?

> *– Hmm. Let me think. Dog. Day. Date. Dark. No,*
>   *those are too short.*

I know! D as in dangerous!

> *– That's good.*

Dangerous-ly!

> *– Even better! Well done! How do you spell that?*

Um. D-A-N-J . . . No, G. D-A-N-G-E . . .

Moreover, in such a conversation, students are using English to communicate in a meaningful way, engaging their brains and feelings, reacting to each other, and collaborating with each other.

- ▪ Discourage students from playing it safe by trying to speak mistake-free English.
- ▪ Encourage them to share ideas and have fun without worrying about mistakes.

Problem solving

Puzzles, problems, and brain-teasers can also stimulate meaningful communication if students work together to solve them. Some people are less adept at solving problems than others, and maybe it's kind of "unfair" to make them use their brains in what is supposed to be an English class, where smartness or math skills shouldn't be favored! But a student-centered approach has to be a "whole-person" approach; otherwise students will be "just practicing" rather than really communicating.

In the following examples from a unit on getting acquainted, students try to solve various puzzles and problems together. Although it might be quicker to do this alone, without distractions, students have to do it with a partner and discuss how to solve the problems. Students are focused on solving the problems and coming up with the correct solutions, but the purpose of the activity is to make them talk in English. It doesn't matter to us if they can't get the answers – what matters is that they speak English.

Pair work Try solving these problems together.

You need to measure one liter of water, but you only have a five-liter bottle and a three-liter bottle. What do you do?	Seven people arrive at a meeting. Each person shakes hands once with each of the others. How many handshakes were there?

Later, the students who were able to solve the problems will *explain* the answers to those who couldn't.

In the next example from the same textbook unit, students are asked to use their imaginations as well as their intelligence. The generous time limit encourages students to think of plenty of uses and words. The model conversations show them how to start.

A Pair work How many imaginative uses can you think of for these things? Make a list. You have three minutes.

> shoelace   ruler   wire hanger   newspaper   wastebasket

"You can tie a package with a shoelace."
> *– "Good idea! You can also use it to . . ."*

B Pair work How many words can you make using the letters in this phrase? Make a list. You have three minutes.

S O L V I N G   P R O B L E M S

"Let's think. I know, there's 'rob,' 'some,' and . . ."
> *– "And 'live' and . . ."*

C Join another pair Compare your lists. Then discuss these questions.

- Who had the longest list for part A? Who had the most imaginative uses?
- Who had the most words for part B? Who had the longest word?
- Which problem was easier? Why?

Our role as teacher here is to monitor students while they're doing the activity and make notes for feedback later. But we won't try to impress the students with our own imaginative uses, or long words like *blossoming* or *gloominess*. This is a student-centered activity.

- Assign puzzles and brain teasers that encourage students to have meaningful conversations while working together to solve them.
- Give groups plenty of time to share theories and ideas.

Grammar and vocabulary exercises

Perhaps surprisingly, grammar or vocabulary exercises are ideal student-centered activities. They can provoke lively discussion and genuine communication in English. Again, it might be quicker to do them alone, but doing them together can be fun and worthwhile.
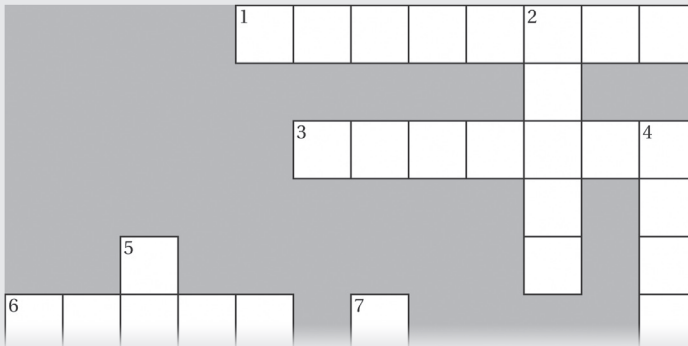
Here's the top part of a crossword-style vocabulary exercise from a textbook unit on food and drink (there are more clues Across and Down than shown here):

ACROSS

1. I add one _____ of honey to sweeten my tea.
3. fish and shrimp, for example
6. something you eat between meals

DOWN

2. The ingredients of bread are _____, yeast, and water.
4. eat this after the main course

As students work together on this kind of exercise, they share ideas, hunches, and conjectures in a very interesting way. Like any genuine conversation, it's entirely unpredictable what people will say or even what the outcome will be:

> *Any ideas for 3 across?*
>> *– Hmm. Well it's seven letters long. What was the clue again?*
> *"Fish and shrimp, for example" and the fifth letter is O because 2 down is "FLOUR"*
>> *– What about 4 down? What could that be?*

That must be DESSERT.
– OK, so fish and shrimp end in D.
I know!
– What?
SEAFOOD!
– Yes that fits. Well done! What's next?

Usually students would do this kind of exercise alone, and then compare their answers later – but sometimes doing it together can be fun!

▪ Even doing grammar and vocabulary exercises in pairs encourages students to share ideas, hunches, and conjectures in new and interesting ways!

Conclusions

I hope you haven't gotten the impression from the preceeding chapters that I'm advocating that students work in pairs or groups *all the time,* and that teacher-led work should be avoided. As students become more confident, they will do more and more student-centered work, but we must strike a balance between leading the students and letting them have control of their learning. This balance may be different from class to class. Some classes may not respond so well to autonomy and demand that all their activities be teacher-led – but giving in to students may not be in their best interests. You may need to persuade and cajole them into spending an increasing amount of time on student-centered activities.

In a student-centered classroom, students are involved in the learning process and become committed to improving their English. Different learning styles can be accommodated, and students can help each other to develop their skills.

In a student-centered class, students get more "talking time." In a whole-class activity, the teacher may talk 50 percent of the time, and the students the rest of the time. No, wait! In a class of 50, each student would talk only about 1 percent of the time, and most wouldn't say anything. In groups of four, each student can talk about 25 percent of the time. In pairs, each student can talk about 50 percent of the time. **If students want to improve their speaking skills, there's no substitute for pair and group work.**

Student-centered activities are enjoyable and stimulating. Hearing different points of view, sharing experiences, brainstorming ideas, explaining things, reacting to other people, and expressing your feelings can be fun. Working together can be exciting – sometimes even moving!

Further reading

Leo Jones has published the following titles with Cambridge University Press:

Adult Courses

- *Let's Talk, Second Edition*
- *New Cambridge Advanced English*

Skills Courses

- *Functions of American English*
- *Great Ideas*
- *Voices Video*

Examinations

- *Making Progress to First Certificate*
- *New Progress to First Certificate*
- *New Progress to Proficiency*

Professional English

- *Working in English*
- *New International Business English*
- *Welcome!, Second Edition*