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**ARTICLES**

**2** **The Art of Imitation: How to Use Outlines to Teach Rhetorical Prosody and Structure**  
VANCE SCHAEFER AND LINDA ABE

**14** **Simple English Wikipedia: Free Resources for Beginner to Intermediate Levels**  
KATRINA J. SCHMIDT AND EMMA RYE

**22** **READER'S GUIDE**  
**Questions for analysis and discussion**

**24** **TEACHING TECHNIQUES**  
**Media Circles: Lively, Learner-Led Lessons**  
ADAM BRAZENAS

**28** **Teaching Register to EFL Writers: Formality and Deference in Written Communication**  
RICHARD SCHLIGHT

**33** **Mingle Bingo**  
SUZAN ARRER AND ALIYA SADUOVNA ZHOLDABAYEVA

**38** **MY CLASSROOM**  
**Cote d'Ivoire**

**44** **TRY THIS**  
**Story Retelling with a Twist**  
WENDY COULSON

**THE LIGHTER SIDE**  
**Q & A Search (Inside back cover)**

# The Art of Imitation: How to Use Outlines to Teach Rhetorical Prosody and Structure

**N**onnative speakers of a language are often at a disadvantage in producing extended speech, as they have differing native (L1) phonological systems and rhetorical traditions or little experience in giving talks. Prosody in the form of stress, rhythm, and intonation is a difficult but crucial area needed to master extended speech because prosody interacts with structure to play a key role in conveying meaning (i.e., intelligibility) and easing understanding (i.e., comprehensibility) (see Munro and Derwing 1995 for discussion on intelligibility, comprehensibility, and pronunciation).

However, second-language (L2) speakers of English might not effectively produce this rhetorical prosody. For example, they may not fully utilize pitch range to signal a shift in topics (Wennerstrom 1998), potentially resulting in lower comprehension levels (Munro and Derwing 1995; Wennerstrom 1998).

This difficulty appears to arise from a lack of understanding and/or effective practice, as gauged from our teaching experience.

While the mechanics of academic writing and grammar are taught to L2 English learners, the rhetorical elements of prosody do not appear to be commonly taught. We also sense that many instructors are not very familiar with the role of prosody at the level of discourse, nor are they confident in how they might teach it; that seems to be a common situation in pronunciation teaching in general (Baker 2014; Darcy 2018).

In response, we created a technique centered on imitation of talks as a means for teaching

rhetorical prosody and structure: namely, putting the focus on using outlines. This article serves as a primer for practitioners of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL), describing how to use outlines as an effective technique to teach rhetorical prosody and structure to learners at the level of high school, university, and beyond. This article covers the following:

1. a simple overview of prosody and structure in English, described with concrete features and rules
2. the motivation behind the use of outlining
3. a broad framework with step-by-step guidelines to using outlines
4. potential issues, along with possible remedies

## PROSODY IN ENGLISH RHETORIC

*Prosody* broadly refers to stress, intonation, and rhythm and is key in shaping information in discourse as part of communicative competence (Chun 1988), helping listeners to understand spoken English (see Levis 2018 for an extensive detailed description of intonation and intelligibility). Additionally, fluency, another key component of extended speech, intertwines with prosody, being defined as “native-like use of pausing, rhythm, intonation, stress, [and] rate of speaking” (Richards, Platt, and Weber 1985, 107). Thus, prosody represents a type of “phonological fluency,” which parallels rhetorical structure and conveys meaning and intent.

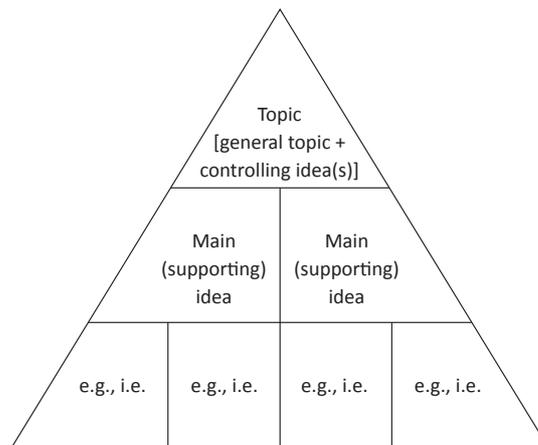
As such, learners require an awareness of prosody and its role in rhetoric. Specifically, learners need to have knowledge of and practice the physical characteristics of stress, its rules in phrasing and structuring extended speech, intonational paragraphs, and prosodic rhetorical devices (see the Appendix for a detailed description of prosody).

## STRUCTURING A TALK

Structure is another key to mastering rhetoric. We construct a simple pyramid like that in Figure 1 as a visual to aid students in structuring and deconstructing talks: general topic [plus controlling idea(s)], main supporting ideas, and development with supporting examples and explanations. By following this simple template, students learn to build their arguments by offering examples and explanations to support ideas that in turn support the topic of a paragraph and/or the entire talk. For example, in a talk about ways to better our world, the following could be one supporting idea:

I support entomophagy as one means to save the planet. **That is**, eating insects as a food source can lessen the stress on our environment while feeding larger populations more cost effectively. **For example**, eating grasshoppers would create less CO<sub>2</sub> than raising livestock,

while the protein and iron content of insects can equal or outweigh that of beef. (Based on Bryce 2014)



**Figure 1. Structure of a talk (Note that “e.g., i.e.” in the bottom row refers to examples and explanations.)**

In our teaching, we discuss other details of structure and content, including these main elements: (1) types of *hooks* used to introduce a talk and capture the audience’s attention, such as sayings, quotes, information, rhetorical questions, and anecdotes; (2) rhetorical styles, such as informative, persuasive, descriptive, narrative, and sequenced speech; (3) visuals, such as charts and graphs; (4) rhetorical devices, such as rhetorical questions; and (5) transition words and phrases. We also demonstrate how these elements of structure can be combined to create a talk. For example, one talk may feature several elements, such as using descriptions of a chart and sequenced information along with an anecdote, in an attempt to persuade listeners to a particular viewpoint.

We contrast the basic structure in Figure 1 against other rhetorical structures students may have learned in their home countries. Our intention is not to comment on the similarities and differences between the basic structure in Figure 1 and those mentioned by learners, whether from their L1 or from English. Indeed, we are aware that discourse in other languages—like Japanese—may actually be structured along similar lines to English discourse (Kubota 1997). Rather,

our aim is to use any discussion about cross-linguistic comparisons (see Kaplan 1966 and Connor 2002 for details) to emphasize that some form of rhetorical structure should be used and then offer the simple, straightforward structure in Figure 1. In other words, we do not aim to prescribe rhetorical structures and features, but rather to boost learners' passive comprehension of talks and perhaps instill in learners the incentive to use some form of structure in creating talks.

Moreover, individual differences in terms of background should be considered. We note that native speakers of English may also have difficulty in commanding rhetorical skills. As such, learners' education and exposure to media may influence what they know about rhetoric, while their L1 may potentially shape their perception and production of rhetorical prosody. In response, we address difficulties by again offering learners possible rhetorical structures and features, along with the rules governing them as used in English.

### **MOTIVATION FOR USING OUTLINING TO MASTER RHETORIC**

Research on L2 learning informs the use of outlines to teach rhetoric. Explicit knowledge may transform into implicit knowledge through practice and can enhance *noticing* (Ellis and Shintani 2014), which in turn can promote acquisition (Schmidt 1990). Learning occurs when learners process input and output in meaningful interactions, so we also encourage a focus on form transitioning to a focus on meaning (i.e., controlled/guided practice; Celce-Murcia, Brinton, and Goodwin 2010). This adheres to three of the principles of instructed language learning from Ellis and Shintani (2014, 24–25), which indicate that extensive L2 input, opportunities for output, and interaction are needed to develop proficiency.

Specifically, Pickering (2004, 2018) notes the need to boost awareness of rhetorical prosody and structure and offers suggestions to more effectively practice discourse intonation. These suggestions include creating opportunities

for practice; using a range of speech types (such as read speech vs. prepared speech vs. spontaneous speech), as intonation varies by speech type; avoiding scripted/rehearsed talks that may result in memorization; promoting preparation such as whiteboard use and organization; and using outlines “to reduce the hesitations and stumbling that result from completely unplanned oral production” (Pickering 2018, 114).

Practice must be pitched beyond the level of the sentence and at the level of discourse in order to stimulate learners to become aware of rhetorical prosody (Levis and Pickering 2004) and to boost comprehensibility and fluency (Derwing, Munro, and Wiebe 1998). Moreover, classical training advocates imitation as a means of mastering the art of rhetoric. Imitation enables a learner to build a foundation, potentially resulting in eventual innovation.

Prompted and guided by these recommendations, we expanded upon the simple idea of outlining, making it the focus for teaching rhetoric, as it (1) avoids scripting while allowing limited preparation and promoting communication over merely reading prepared speeches or regurgitating memorized speeches; (2) raises awareness of rhetorical prosody by offering explicit rules and features; and (3) offers practice of stress at the discourse level with guidance. Outlining allows learners to do the following:

- concentrate on prosody and structure and less so on content
- work on fluency—a natural rhythm/speech rate
- strengthen awareness of rhetorical prosody and structure
- model how to structure a talk
- employ transition words and phrases and language commonly used in talks (e.g., “I will discuss the following . . .”; “The main point is . . .”)

- improve listening skills through familiarity with rhetorical structure and prosody, including both top-down and bottom-up processing
- reinforce writing skills, including essay writing and note-taking, as the structures are similar
- enhance critical thinking through analysis of talks
- boost confidence in oratory skill

### GENERAL FRAMEWORK OF OUTLINING

We advocate both intensive and extensive listening to talks by learners and increased opportunity for the production of short talks and/or parts of talks by learners using outlines. We use TED (<https://www.ted.com/#/>) and TED-Ed (<https://ed.ted.com/>) videos, as they offer short three- to five-minute talks on an array of topics. TED offers the advantage of transcripts in English and usually the L1 of the learner, reducing the time and effort needed to look up words and understand talks and providing more time to focus on the mechanics of rhetoric. TED-Ed does not generally have transcripts, preventing overreliance on the written form and thus enhancing listening skills. Also, TED features speakers using a variety of Englishes, including many speakers of English as a second language. Listening to other ESL speakers can be motivating to learners and provides them with greater exposure and practice listening to world Englishes.

Additionally, we encourage teachers to re-create and model these talks themselves for the class and/or create their own talks for students to imitate. This is particularly recommended when access to the Internet is limited; when content is too difficult for the learners; when there are constraints on teaching such as limited time; or when the teacher wishes to coordinate the talk with grammar, vocabulary, or topics being taught in the lesson or course.

Finally, we promote imitation of talks in both spoken and written work. We suggest that

learners write essays on the same topic of the targeted talk(s), or on a closely related topic, using words and phrases (i.e., lecture language), structures, and ideas from the talk(s). Learners do this in conjunction with listening to and analyzing a given talk and then orally imitating and reproducing the talk to promote learning of rhetorical structure and prosody. Thus, oracy and literacy skills should ideally be taught together when teaching rhetoric in order to reinforce each other and create a more stimulating lesson. This is particularly crucial in aiding learners in closing any perceived unbalanced proficiency gap between oracy and literacy skills. Incidentally, using an imitation method as a means to master rhetoric provides an opportunity to discuss plagiarism and any related cultural differences and issues.

In sum, informed by research, teaching tradition, and experience, we recommend the following:

1. Promote imitation as a means to master rhetoric.
2. Use outlining to aid imitation, as it provides learners with ideas to talk about, enabling them to concentrate on prosody and structure.
3. Give tangible features and rules for prosody and structuring to provide learners with something concrete to learn and instructors to assess.
4. Provide extensive input and opportunities for output.
5. Supplement talks with supporting activities to enhance different aspects of rhetoric (e.g., pronunciation, structuring, and fluency).
6. Reinforce oracy skills with literacy skills (and vice versa).
7. Reflect upon teaching practices and experiment with methods.

## STEP-BY-STEP GUIDELINES FOR USING OUTLINING AS A TEACHING METHOD

Instructors can implement the step-by-step process of using outlines shown in Table 1. Our

approach takes suggestions from the revised Bloom’s taxonomy of a simple-to-complex hierarchy of cognitive processes for learning: remembering, understanding, applying, analyzing, evaluating, and creating (Krathwohl 2002).

STEPS	DESCRIPTION
<b>1. Listen</b>	Students listen to the talk, noting structure, prosody, and other targeted rhetorical features.
<b>2. Deconstruct</b>	Students analyze the talk and deconstruct it into its structural and prosodic components.
<b>3. Outline</b>	Students write a basic outline according to the pyramid, adding other features such as hooks. The instructor looks over the outlines and may provide a sample outline for students as a model after discussion and attempts at outlining.
<b>4. Re-create</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students re-create the entire short talk or parts of the talk in small groups, based on their outline or the model outline that the instructor provides.</li> <li>• Students re-create the talk in class in front of their peers, adding body language and audience interaction.</li> <li>• As homework, students may also audio-record the talk.</li> <li>• The instructor should allow creativity as long as the original intent and style are faithfully maintained in the re-created talk. That is, students can add examples or hooks and/or change the length. This can help students be creative and still master rhetorical structure.</li> </ul>
<b>5. Evaluate</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students and instructor evaluate each student’s talk according to a set of targeted features, preferably on a handout.</li> <li>• Students and instructor compare evaluations, looking for discrepancies in order to boost awareness and understanding.</li> <li>• The instructor provides feedback to the evaluations by students.</li> </ul>
<b>6. Reinforce</b>	Students complete other activities to support aspects of giving a talk, such as writing hooks and completing pronunciation exercises.
<b>7. Repeat</b>	The above process—from “1. Listen” to “6. Reinforce”—is repeated step-by-step for another talk.
<b>8. Perform</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students take a weekly or biweekly cumulative oral quiz. They practice a set of three to five talks that they have recently studied. For the quiz, one of the talks is randomly chosen for the student to re-create. The student has one minute to look over the outline and gather his or her thoughts before using the outline to give the talk. Making students responsible for several talks means that it is difficult for them to memorize any given talk and thereby requires more reliance on an outline, resulting in more spontaneous speech.</li> <li>• Other students evaluate the talk and hand in an evaluation to the instructor, who assesses these evaluations. Again, this is to boost awareness among learners. The instructor evaluates the talk as well.</li> <li>• The talk should ideally be videotaped using a video recorder (or iPad with special equipment, e.g., robotic platform) with a motion detector to assess stress-timed body movement, eye contact, audience engagement, and excessive movement. The recording is uploaded and sent to the student. The student evaluates the talk and then compares his or her evaluation with the peers’ and instructor’s.</li> </ul>
<b>9. Experiment</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Students might experiment in creating original talks on topics of their choice, similar topics to previous talks, or topics assigned by the instructor.</li> <li>• This step may be a great leap forward, but it is the ultimate objective of learners in mastering public speaking. As such, this step may be reserved for the end of a course, or it can be cut. To scaffold between the previous steps and this potentially “final” step, the instructor might assign topics that are similar to the talks assigned as models. This allows learners to make minor adjustments, such as changing the examples and rewording explanations.</li> </ul>

**Table 1. Step-by-step process of using outlines**

Students are required to turn in fairly concise, precise outlines that might look similar to the one in Table 2. This talk by Cutts (2011) is short (3 minutes, 12 seconds) and generally follows the simple pyramid structure shown in Figure 1.

Outline of TED Talk: Try something new for 30 days (Cutts 2011) (3:12)	
<a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/matt_cutts_try_something_new_for_30_days?language=en">http://www.ted.com/talks/matt_cutts_try_something_new_for_30_days?language=en</a>	
I. Introduction	
A. Hook: Stuck in a rut	
II. Background info	
A. I tried something new for 30 days.	
B. Thesis statement: You should try something new for 30 days.	
III. What I learned	
A. Time was more memorable.	
1. Taking a photo every day	
a. Remembered where I was and what I did	
B. Gained self-confidence	
1. From computer nerd to guy who bikes to work	
2. Hiked Mt. Kilimanjaro	
a. Would not have done it without the 30-day challenge	
C. Do what you really want.	
1. Write a novel.	
a. It was awful, though.	
b. I can say I'm a novelist.	
IV. Conclusion	
A. Small changes = sustainable (big achievement)	
B. 30 days is short, but fun	
C. Why don't you try?	

**Table 2. TED Talk sample outline**

TED and TED-Ed Talks for Outlining	
<b>TED Talks</b>	1. Graham Hill: "Why I'm a weekday vegetarian" (3:57) <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_weekday_vegetarian">http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_weekday_vegetarian</a> Lists the cons of eating meat, explains a compromise for reducing meat consumption, and enumerates the positive results  2. Graham Hill: "Less stuff, more happiness" (5:34) <a href="http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_less_stuff_more_happiness">http://www.ted.com/talks/graham_hill_less_stuff_more_happiness</a> Discusses the disadvantages of having too many possessions and offers tips for "editing" one's life or possessions
<b>TED-Ed Talks</b>	1. Emma Bryce: "Should we eat bugs?" (4:51) <a href="http://ed.ted.com/lessons/should-we-eat-bugs-emma-bryce">http://ed.ted.com/lessons/should-we-eat-bugs-emma-bryce</a> Outlines the history and culture of why parts of the world stopped eating bugs, how some parts of the world currently eat bugs, and why we should eat bugs in modern times  2. Leah Lagos and Jaspal Ricky Singh: "How playing sports benefits your body ... and your brain" (3:46) <a href="http://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-playing-sports-benefits-your-body-and-your-brain-leah-lagos-and-jaspal-ricky-singh">http://ed.ted.com/lessons/how-playing-sports-benefits-your-body-and-your-brain-leah-lagos-and-jaspal-ricky-singh</a> Discusses the reasons why sports are good for the body and for the mind

**Table 3. TED and TED-Ed talks for outlining**

Table 3 contains a sampling of similar TED and TED-Ed talks instructors might use for outlining.

### ACTIVITIES TO SUPPORT ORAL DISCOURSE

The following supporting activities can be used to reinforce perceived deficiencies in rhetorical structure, prosody, or other issues.

1. *Writing essays or parts of an essay.* Students write an essay on the same or similar topic as an assigned talk to reinforce both understanding and oral production. They write out the development of one supporting idea of a topic or opinion. For example, students can write out an activity that they might do in a 30-day period under Part III in the TED talk outlined in Table 2.
  2. *Marking scripts for thought groups, content words vs. function words, and focus words.* Students mark all or part of a transcript of a talk to demonstrate a metalinguistic understanding of rhetorical prosody and structure. For example, students can mark the introduction of the TED talk outlined in Table 2 by dividing sentences into thought groups with a backward slash, circling the content words, and putting a dot or X-mark over the focus words.
  3. *Reading scripts out loud.* Students read the script of a talk out loud to practice the rhetorical prosody and structure. They can use a marked script at first and progress to using an unmarked script.
  4. *Paraphrasing and summarizing information of part or all of a talk.* Students paraphrase or summarize the key points of all or part of a talk to practice outlining. This is basically an oral outline. Adding a time limit may encourage fluency.
  5. *Extensive listening of talks.* Students listen to easy-to-understand, longer talks to boost their awareness of rhetorical prosody and structure. They can also
6. *Giving short in-class or recorded responses to prompts.* Students give short, impromptu, structured responses to prompts in class, such as “Describe the strangest food you have ever eaten” and “Why should people learn a foreign language?” They can also record their responses on their phone and upload them onto the course website for evaluation by both the instructor and student.
  7. *Selecting the picture, graph, or other image that the instructor describes.* The instructor describes one chart of data among a set of three or more charts. Students listen and choose which chart the instructor has described. This allows students to hear the modeling of how to describe visual data.
  8. *Practicing short, focused structured speech or mini-talks.* Students describe a picture; explain a chart or graph; tell the steps of how to make something; tell a story based on a comic strip, movie, or fairy tale; or list reasons to support an idea.
  9. *Shadowing talks.* Students shadow the talks.
  10. *Practicing key phrases.* Students practice key phrases in a game of telephone or filling in the blanks of a talk.
  11. *Doing pronunciation exercises.* Students do jazz chants (Graham 1978) to practice stress and stress timing.

listen nonstop to all the talks practiced in past classes.

Feedback on students’ oral discourse is a means to raise awareness and an important aspect of training students (see Table 4). We use a simple three-point scale reflecting Japanese grading practices (o / △ / x or corresponding smiley faces: ☺ = okay / ☹ = needs some work / ☹☹ = needs much work). This system allows for easy, quick, broad assessment, as there are many criteria that can be subjective.

Target Discourse Features	😊	😐	😞	Comments
<b>Structure</b>				
Hook				
Thesis statement				
Topic sentences				
Support (i.e., e.g.)				
Transition words				
Thought groups				
<b>Prosody</b>				
Word stress (vowel length, schwa, placement)				
Contrastive stress				
Content vs. function words				
Focus words				
Intonational paragraphs (increased/decreased pitch/speed)				
<b>Other issues</b>				
Voice				
Body movement/gestures (timed with stress)				
Segments (vowels, consonants)				
Enunciation				
Interaction (eye contact, rhetorical questions)				
Vocabulary (lecture language, relevant terms)				
Outline (structure, concise/precise wording, economy of language, comprehensiveness—main ideas, explanations, examples)				
<b>Content</b>				
<b>Holistic impression</b>				

**Table 4. Evaluation of students' oral discourse**

Also, it may be more effective to focus in stages on only a few criteria for a given recording or performance. For example, depending on the instructor's assessment, features that greatly impede intelligibility may be the focus in early talks, with a move toward less critical features in later talks.

Additionally, an instructor could focus on each student's needs by having each work on only the features that need the most work, as determined by the instructor and student in consultation. Also, during practice and/or when evaluating the performance of other students or their own performance,

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## Prosody is a crucial element of rhetoric, structuring information and thereby enabling speakers to clearly convey meaning and intent.

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different groups of students can focus on separate sets of criteria or even just one criterion. For example, a few students might assess nonlinguistic features such as body movement, gestures, and eye contact, while other students might focus on features of the structure such as the hook, thesis statement, and supporting ideas. Another group might focus on prosody. As such, students can rotate, assessing different sets of criteria and working with different students who have varying strengths and weaknesses.

Assessment aims for intelligibility and not nativeness (Munro and Derwing 1995). We acknowledge Englishes around the world, including international/regional/L2 varieties, where prosody may factor less in influencing intelligibility (Deterding 2012; Jenkins 2000). We temper our assessment accordingly by considering learners' needs for both global (possibly stress-timed) and local (possibly syllable-timed) English varieties (Low 2015).

Lastly, we employ both oral and written assessment tools to determine intelligibility issues and identify their possible causes. One assessment entails giving a few written quizzes eliciting metalinguistic knowledge of the elements of rhetorical structure and even prosody—for example, instructors could ask students the following: “What is a possible hook for the following topic?”; “What are the features of stress?”; “What is the focus word in each of the following phrases?” However, given the spoken nature of talks, we emphasize the ultimate need for oral assessment in teaching rhetoric through oral presentations of entire short talks or parts of talks, either live or recorded.

To reinforce the evaluation criteria, we set clear, measurable learning outcomes, as in the

following sample, to guide practice, evaluation, and the creation of supplemental activities.

By the end of the course, students will be able to do the following:

1. Pronounce stressed syllables with longer, louder, higher-pitched, unreduced vowels.
2. Pronounce unstressed syllables with shorter, quieter, lower-pitched, possibly reduced vowels.
3. Speak in thought groups.
4. Identify function, content, and focus words.
5. Introduce new topics with higher pitch, increased rate of speech, and louder voice.
6. Structure (i.e., outline) talks into supporting topics with relevant examples and/or explanations.
7. Create on-target thesis statements, topic sentences, and hooks.

Finally, we recommend that instructors reflect upon the teaching of rhetoric by experimenting on their own with outlining and additional supporting methods and activities.

### REFLECTION AND FUTURE PEDAGOGICAL DIRECTIONS

Overall, the use of outlining, combined with providing explicit descriptions of the features of rhetorical prosody and structure, allows students to concentrate on and practice these features and to increase their confidence

Remaining Issues	Potential Countermeasures
1. Learners sometimes memorize parts of speeches.	Oral quizzes could test learners on one talk randomly chosen from four or five talks. A short question-and-answer session after each talk could elicit spontaneous speech samples.
2. Students need work on using slide presentations with the talks.	Instructors create guiding principles and activities for making and using slide presentations and incorporate talks using PowerPoint-like visuals, which are often used in TED talks, to serve as models.
3. Students improve usage of prosody but have remaining issues with segments and enunciation.	Instructors increase emphasis on and practice of segments and enunciation or any aspect of pronunciation to address students' needs.
4. When students are asked to create original talks, there is still a lack of creativity, possibly due to factors such as lack of exposure to certain topics and limited research skills.	Instructors set aside time to provide guidance and practice for learners to create original talks, particularly at the end of a course after much guided practice.

**Table 5. Remaining issues and potential countermeasures**

as they can point to and practice concrete features.

Writing essays in tandem reinforces rhetorical skills, as they generally employ the same structure (including such features as hooks and topic development), transition words, and rhetorical language (e.g., lecture language). When the topics for essays or writing exercises are similar to those of the talks, learners are also able to recycle vocabulary and ideas. There are, however, remaining issues with potential countermeasures, as summarized in Table 5.

## CONCLUSION

A strong command of rhetoric allows one to orally express oneself clearly, informatively, and persuasively in order to tell “a story, with a shape and logic intended to stir its audience” when pitching ideas for new policies, products, or companies (Bruni 2018). It also enables learners to explain concepts and information in an academic course or on the speaking sections of high-stakes English proficiency exams. Prosody is a crucial element of rhetoric, structuring information and thereby enabling speakers to clearly convey meaning and intent. Yet rhetorical prosody is difficult for L2 learners to understand and practice and for

instructors to teach. We hope that other ESL/EFL practitioners benefit from our experience and suggestions in using outlines to focus practice on rhetorical prosody and structure—and in this manner boost the rhetorical skills of foreign/second language learners of English, particularly those who must use English in their academic courses and professional careers.

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# APPENDIX

## The Mechanics of Prosody in English Rhetoric

1. <b>Physical Characteristics</b>	Stressed syllables are pronounced longer, louder, and higher in pitch while maintaining vowel quality. Unstressed syllables are shorter, quieter, and lower in pitch with vowel quality generally reduced to a schwa [ə] (e.g., “a” in <i>about</i> ) or another lax vowel (e.g., [ɛ] as in <i>bet</i> or [ɪ] as in <i>hit</i> ) (Fry 1958). We see a shift between these features in the same syllable when stressed and unstressed in “eCOonomy” to “ecoNOmic” (with primary stress marked by capitalization).
2. <b>Word Types</b>	Function words such as determiners, pronouns, prepositions, conjunctions, helping verbs, and the <i>be-</i> verb indicate grammar. All other words are considered content words. Function words are generally less stressed than content words. We see this difference in stress in sentences such as “the GIRL and the BOY have GONE to SCHOOL” (where the content words are capitalized). The stressing of content words aids comprehension and is analogous to writing a text message using only content words, as in, “Watch movie tonight?”
3. <b>Contrastive Stress</b>	Words, whether function or content words, may be more stressed if they are emphasized: “The book is UNDER the desk, not ON the desk,” with increased stress indicated by capitalization.
4. <b>Thought Groups and Focus Words</b>	Words are grouped into phrases called thought groups, reflecting structure and making speech comprehensible. The last content word in a thought group is by default the most stressed (i.e., the focus word). For example: “This morning, we discussed DINOSAURS. Now, we will discuss the EVOLUTION of dinosaurs.” The focus of the second utterance shifts from the default last content word <i>dinosaurs</i> to the new information of <i>evolution</i> (see Ladefoged 2006; Sardegna, Chiang, and Ghosh 2016 for greater details).
5. <b>Intonational Paragraphs</b>	Topics are organized into intonational paragraphs, which are in a sense the counterpart to written paragraphs. New topics are marked by higher pitch, accelerated rates, and increased volume, whereas the end of a topic is marked by the inverse features of lower pitch, slower rates, decreased volume, and narrowing range of pitch (Brown, Currie, and Kenworthy 1980). Longer pauses mark shifts between major topics than between minor topics (Brown, Currie, and Kenworthy 1980; Cutler, Dahan, and van Donselaar 1997; see Pickering [2004, 2018] and Wichmann [2015] for an overview).
6. <b>Transition Words and Phrases</b>	Transition words and phrases such as <i>therefore</i> and <i>as a result</i> are usually stressed, being the focus word or phrase in a thought group or using contrastive stress. They mark the structure of a talk, just as traffic signs guide drivers on a road.
7. <b>Phonological Rhetorical Devices</b>	Stress with other features such as rhyme, repetition, and alliteration is exploited to create rhythm and effect, as in slogans, sayings, and wordplay (Schaefer, Darcy, and Abe 2019).
8. <b>Body Language</b>	Body language may reinforce prosody; movement of the hands and body is generally done on stressed syllables. Body language may coincide with stressed words such as content words, transition words, and focus words: speakers might step to another place or move the direction of their gaze when shifting topics or making a point.
9. <b>Pausing</b>	Pausing is a rhetorical device related to prosody in the sense that it is the lack of sound and interacts with rhythm. This lack of sound calls the attention of the listeners, allowing effective rhetorical use. It has been shown that although generally viewed negatively as an indication of disfluency, in fact some <i>fillers</i> —such as “uh”—may benefit listeners by drawing attention to what follows (Fox Tree 2001).

# Simple English Wikipedia: Free Resources for Beginner to Intermediate Levels

**F**inding free, level-appropriate texts that can be shared with students—and that have no copyright issues—is a challenge. English language teachers often have to build their own collection of paper-based or online texts by purchasing them and making copies or creating texts entirely on their own, which takes time that many teachers do not have. Buying reading materials may not be cheap in any context, but it is sometimes impossible to find and purchase them in international English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. As teachers who have worked in a variety of places, we have struggled with these challenges and are always on the lookout for free accessible texts. That search is what led us to using Simple English Wikipedia (SEW) in the classroom.

SEW is a language option on Wikipedia, a free online encyclopedia, created for children and adults learning English. It works like any other language option on Wikipedia, and as of now, there are over 150,000 entries. These entries are shorter and have simpler language structures than regular Wikipedia articles. Writers of these SEW pages are advised to use only the first 1,000 most frequent English words, if possible, and give real-world examples to support complex ideas. They also cannot use idiomatic language in the passages or specific terminology without defining it. Difficult words and concepts have links to other SEW pages that provide more information or have pop-up definitions that appear when the reader hovers the cursor over them; these features promote reading the definitions in English rather than relying on translations.

Teachers also benefit from using SEW. With so many entries to choose from, you can find a topic related to almost any theme you are discussing in your classroom. SEW is also a Creative Commons resource, which means you can adapt it, share it online, project it in your classroom, or print and distribute it, as long as you reference the source. This level of accessibility makes SEW particularly useful for teachers who have limited time to hunt for resources.

At the same time, as teachers, we understand the skepticism around using Wikipedia as a resource. This website is discouraged in most classrooms; one reason is that it may tempt students to find information quickly without actually doing research. Students are told from early stages in their academic careers that Wikipedia is not a legitimate source to use or cite in any form of academic writing

or research. Thus, teachers who want to use SEW as a resource should explicitly discuss with students that it is *not* an acceptable source for research in English-language or content courses. However, it offers valuable content as a tool for creating or supplementing tasks and for scaffolding the language-learning process.

In this article, we explore three practical ways you can use SEW in your classroom for students at the beginner to intermediate levels. We will explain each task and then offer ideas for variations. These tasks focus mainly on reading, grammar, and writing. All tasks are explained with the assumption that students have computer access and the classroom is equipped with Internet connectivity and a video projector. However, computers are not necessary. Teachers can simply print any of the material they design using SEW instead of asking students to access the website directly. Students then use pen and paper to complete each task. The main downside to not accessing the site directly is that students will lose access to the built-in online dictionary.

Throughout the article, we refer to other online resources that might help teachers in the process of designing or implementing a particular task (see “Online Resources for Teachers” in the References section at the end of this article).

To access SEW, visit the main page at [https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main\\_Page](https://simple.wikipedia.org/wiki/Main_Page) (see Figure 1). You can type a topic into the search bar and click on “Search” to see if there is a related entry. Alternatively, you may scroll to the bottom of the main page to access “Knowledge groups” and browse topics SEW has to offer (see Figure 2).

Following are three ways to use SEW in your classroom.

### 1. READING PRACTICE AND VOCABULARY BUILDING

I. S. P. Nation (2009) states that the purpose of reading practice for students is not only to help them understand the text they are



Figure 1. The main page of Simple English Wikipedia (2019c)

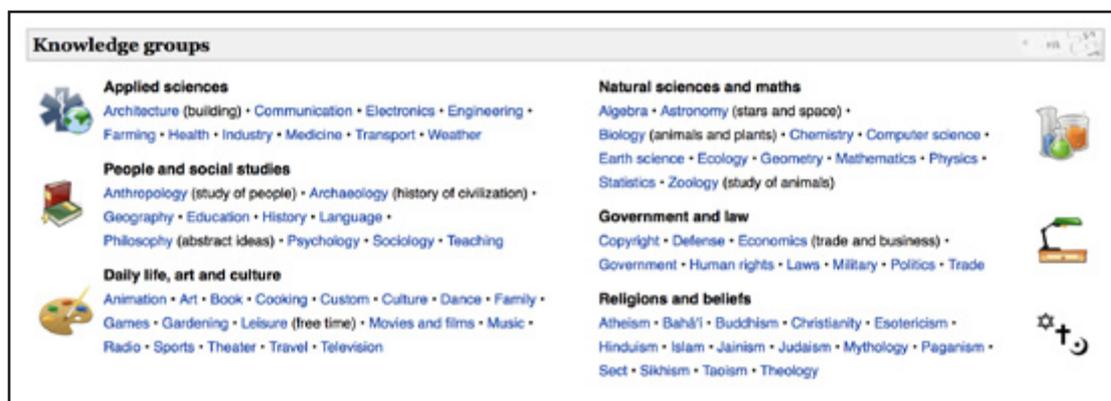


Figure 2. Knowledge groups in Simple English Wikipedia (2019c)

reading at the moment, but also to train them to understand texts they will encounter in the future. Nation suggests that teachers may need to create their own reading exercises to fit the particular needs of their students. Instead of spending time writing their own texts, teachers can use SEW entries and adapt them. They can then create their own activities based on the type of reading practice the students need. Following is a reading-comprehension activity for lower-level students that helps build vocabulary and reading skills.

### Planning

2. Find an appropriate article from SEW. The article can be connected to a theme being discussed in class, or it can be a new topic that will be scaffolded.
3. Use the free English Profile Text Inspector (<http://www.englishprofile.org/wordlists/text-inspector>) to gauge the level of this text. Most words in the text will be at the beginner level, with some higher-level words.
4. Use the text inspector to create a vocabulary list and decide if you want to pre-teach difficult words or if you prefer to edit the text and print out the edited version at the desired level. If you decide to keep the article as is, students reading online may also use the SEW built-in dictionary to hover over certain words and reveal their meanings.
5. Create a set of comprehension questions for students to complete after reading the text. These comprehension questions can be tailored to your students' levels and needs. For example, beginner students should answer questions based on main ideas of the text, and questions for higher-level students may ask about details or inferences. You can also create questions based on vocabulary in the text. Just as Nation (2009) discusses, you should create comprehension questions for the particular learning needs of your students.

### Procedure

1. Put students into groups of three and, if possible, have one computer per group. Give students a link to the SEW page along with the set of comprehension questions and ask them to read the questions before they read the article.
2. Give students an appropriate amount of time—based on the difficulty of the questions, length of the text, and level of the students—to answer the comprehension questions.
3. After the time has passed, students share their answers with the class by writing one or two answers either on the board or on an online platform.

### More ideas

Higher-level students can choose a theme that they are interested in, read SEW entries about that theme, and even introduce aspects of extensive reading into this process. For example, each student individually reads a topic that fits under the same theme and, with the whole class or in a small group, shares what he or she has learned as a way to build knowledge about the theme. For example, each student could read something connected to the theme of Japan, such as food in Japan, holidays in Japan, or education in Japan.

## 2. CONTEXTUALIZED GRAMMAR PRACTICE

The importance of being exposed to and learning grammar in a meaningful context is a key aspect of communicative language teaching methodology and second-language acquisition (Brown 2007; Spada 2011). The concept of *noticing* (Ellis 2006, 97) the target language is an important aspect of learning grammar in context and can be encouraged by enhancing texts visually; this is accomplished by highlighting text, bolding letters or words, underlining or italicizing words and phrases, or adding a listening component to the text (Reinders and Ellis 2009). Getting students to notice different forms of grammar within

a text is a valuable step toward teaching the grammar more explicitly at a later point.

The wide range of content available on SEW provides contexts where teachers can draw student attention to grammatical structures. Because SEW offers basic grammar and vocabulary structures, it is appropriate for either presenting or reviewing these structures. Present simple, present continuous, past simple, present perfect, and future tenses, as well as pronouns (personal, possessive, object), are all easily found within SEW pages.

When using SEW texts for grammar activities in our university EFL context, both teachers and students appreciated the range of content and the fact that students could practice reading while learning and reviewing grammar.

#### Planning and procedure

1. Choose an article that contains examples of the structure you are teaching. The structure should appear often enough that students can notice it and begin to see how it functions in different sentences or word patterns. Certain topics will have more of one grammatical structure than another. Present simple can often be found in articles that define concepts, objects, or ideas; past simple often appears in entries that discuss historical events or biographies of people who have died; and present perfect appears in entries that discuss something that started in the past but continues to exist, such as a city, a festival, or a ritual. Future forms appear less frequently but can be added by the teacher. In Figure 3, because the SEW entry on Rosa Parks is about a historical figure, it has many instances of the simple past, especially in the sections of the article that discuss her childhood and arrest.
2. After choosing the SEW article and grammar point(s), teachers can simply copy and paste the text into a document. They can edit the text and then highlight, bold, and/or underline the grammatical

structures they want students to notice. When you are focusing on two or more grammatical structures in the same text, choose two different ways of calling attention to those grammatical structures so that students can notice their differences. In the example from the Rosa Parks article in Figure 3, we chose to bold regular verbs in the simple past and bold and underline irregular verbs in the simple past; this helps students notice first the past simple and then the difference between regular and irregular verbs.

1. On December 1, 1955, Parks **got** onto a city bus to go home after work. She **paid** her 10¢ and **sat** down in the
2. first row of seats behind the painted line on the floor which **marked** the black section. After several stops,
3. more white passengers **got** on the bus. The bus driver **ordered** Parks and three other black people to give up
4. their seats so the white people **could** sit down. The other three **moved** to the back of the bus, but Parks **slid**
5. over to the window. She **said** she was following the law by sitting in the right section.

**Figure 3. Sample SEW article about Rosa Parks with past-tense verbs in bold and/or bold and underlined** (text from Simple English Wikipedia 2019b)

3. When the article is ready for the students, it is time to guide them through a noticing activity. There are many techniques for doing this, but we find that a good approach is to have students read, then elicit what they identified. If you are guiding students through a noticing activity using the Rosa Parks excerpt, you might want them to read silently, then discuss in pairs or small groups what types of bolded words they identified. Then you might elicit their ideas and write them on the board. Depending on the students' level of English, you might immediately get the

answer “past simple,” or your students might simply tell you that they identified “actions.” You could then ask them to identify something similar between all past-simple regular verbs and try to elicit that they all end in “-ed.” You could follow similar steps when working with the past-simple irregular verbs.

#### **Variations**

Teachers with access to a learning management system (such as Blackboard Learn or Moodle) or a free blog like Blogger (<https://www.blogger.com>) or WordPress (<https://wordpress.com/>) can add a recording of themselves reading the text out loud in order to provide an aural form of input for the students.

To add an element of pronunciation practice, students could use the free online tool Vocaroo (<https://vocaroo.com/>), which allows them to record their voices online and provides a web link for them to post their recording on a blog or discussion board. In the Figure 3 example, pronouncing the “-ed” ending sounds of the past-simple verbs would give students valuable pronunciation practice with this challenging structure.

#### **More ideas**

- For more-advanced language learners, teachers can provide a text without any highlighting or annotations and ask them to identify and mark all the instances of a certain grammatical structure. In this scenario, students must have enough knowledge of that grammar structure to identify it. They could do this using pen and paper or on their computers.
- Teachers can also use the text as a context for practicing editing and error correction. They would simply have to alter the SEW text so it contains grammatical errors and ask students to correct them.
- Teachers may take out the past-tense verbs and put spaces and the base form of the verb in their place so students can practice conjugating verbs.

### **3. WRITING PRACTICE**

*Reading to writing* integrates and develops both skills simultaneously; it is one of the most frequent processes students have to engage in at all levels, in general English, in academic English, and in classroom-based and international assessments (Hedgcock and Ferris 2009; Hasan and Akhand 2010). Therefore, practicing this skill can serve students in many contexts. SEW texts are easily applied to the reading-to-writing process, which uses multiple skills and higher-order thinking. Two tasks that can be created using SEW are (a) summarizing and (b) controlled writing practice.

#### **Summarizing**

Regardless of the level or the context, students are often required to summarize information in writing. Whether they are summarizing a short piece of audio or a longer academic text, this can be a challenging skill to master. Therefore, teachers must help students develop this skill in their second or foreign language. The length of entries in SEW is typically between 200 and 1,000 words, as writers are asked to keep entries short. As a result, the texts are perfect for students to use as they develop and practice summarizing skills at the beginner level. As an added benefit, teachers can help scaffold basic academic research skills and educate students on how to correctly cite articles and show them how to avoid plagiarism when summarizing.

#### **Planning**

Find one SEW article for students to summarize. Some articles may be too short for this activity, so make sure any article you choose is an appropriate length. Aim to find an article of at least two paragraphs (often organized into sections by headers) with details and examples so students have enough information to read and summarize.

#### **Procedure**

1. Put students into groups of three and give them a printout of the SEW entry. Biographies or a description of a special

event in history work particularly well for this activity.

2. Have students read the text and ask them to focus on the main ideas. Students can take notes, including important names, dates, and phrases.
3. Tell students to give the printout back to you.
4. With students still in their groups, ask them to use their notes to write two or three sentences summarizing the SEW entry. The length of the summary might vary depending on the length of the original SEW entry; if the entry is longer, students might write more sentences to summarize it. Students may either write on the board or type their sentences, which will later be projected.
5. The class reads each summary, checks for plagiarism (copied phrases or phrases that are too close to the original), and decides whether each group included the main ideas.

This is a precursor to a task where students will summarize an SEW article on their own, so this practice scaffolds the summarizing process and helps students understand how to avoid accidental plagiarism.

### **Controlled writing practice**

Controlled writing occurs when students do writing tasks that focus on grammar, sentence structure, word choice and order, and punctuation instead of focusing on the components of content, organization, and cohesion. One example of controlled writing practice is creating simple and extended definitions of concepts, objects, events, and so on. A simple definition can be written in one sentence; an extended definition contains a simple definition followed by examples, uses, components, types, and the history of what is being defined. Since SEW articles often contain detailed information, students can practice identifying simple and extended definitions, as in the example in Figure 4.

**Simple definition:** Coffee is a plant and the name of the drink that is made from this plant. The drink is made from the seeds of the coffee plant, called coffee beans. **Components:** Coffee contains a chemical called caffeine, a mild drug that keeps people awake. **Types:** Coffee plants originally grew in Africa, and now also grow in South America, Central America and Southeast Asia. They are an important crop for the economies of many countries. **History:** The first branded coffee sold commercially to the public was Nes Café in 1879. **Applications:** Coffee is usually served hot, and is a popular drink in many countries.

**Figure 4. Example of a text used to identify simple and extended definitions** (adapted from Simple English Wikipedia 2019a)

### **Planning**

Find terms for students to read about on SEW. Try to choose terms that students probably will not already be able to define. This ensures that students go through the process of reading, note-taking, and summarizing before writing their definition. Some terms we used were “squirrel,” “printing press,” “coffee,” “bluegrass,” “harmonica,” “sauerkraut,” and “the Trail of Tears.” These terms are all SEW entries with enough content for students to read and summarize.

### **Factors to consider before starting this activity**

- This activity is recommended for advanced or high-intermediate students because of what students are expected to know about summarizing, note-taking, and referencing.
- Teachers should make sure students fully understand the concept of plagiarism, the necessity of students writing in their own words, and the importance of not copying the text word for word. These issues can be discussed before the activity; likewise, the activity could be part of a longer unit that focuses on writing, using sources, and referencing. Sowell (2018) has a helpful discussion about plagiarism, with

suggestions for activities to help students understand and practice the concepts; teachers could consult her article when covering the issue with students.

- Students should have experience with note-taking. This is a skill that you, as the teacher, should cover before this activity or that students have learned previously.
- Students should have been taught how to write an extended definition and recently practiced the technique.

#### Procedure

1. Quickly elicit how to write an extended definition. Use the example about coffee in Figure 4 and have students identify the parts of an extended definition within the text as a warm-up.
2. Distribute one term (such as those mentioned in the Planning section above) to each student and explain to them that they need to read, take notes, and then write an extended definition (one paragraph) about the term they receive.
3. Students will then go onto SEW, look up the term they received, and individually

read about it and take notes. This should take about ten minutes.

4. The teacher should monitor here in order to check that students are not copying the text word for word.
5. Students use the notes they took to write their extended definitions on the whiteboard/blackboard. Other students and the teacher read the definitions.
6. Students identify (by marking and annotating) the parts of the paragraph that correspond to the parts of an extended definition (see Figure 5).
7. Students read one other student's definition, check it for errors, and suggest corrections (if needed).

#### More ideas

This activity allows students to use multiple skills in the process of developing their definitions. It could also be used as a summarizing activity, as it requires students to read, reduce information, and synthesize it. If students do the activity in pairs or small groups, encourage them to speak and listen to each other throughout the reading and

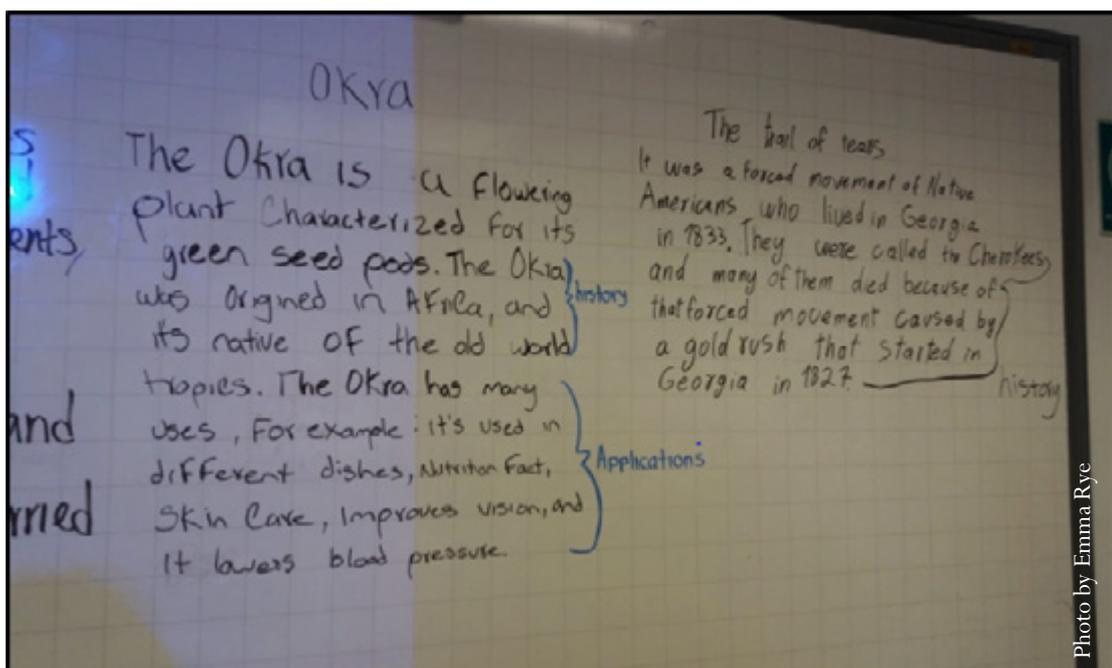


Figure 5. Example of students' annotated definitions

writing process, making it even more interactive. Step 7 brings in the aspect of peer feedback and/or corrections, which is valuable in the writing process. This step could be followed by verbal feedback, where students need to explain their suggestions to the writer.

## CONCLUSION

SEW is a free resource that can reduce the workload for English language teachers who search for and create their own materials. As teachers, we found that using SEW for texts reduced lesson-planning time and ensured that texts were at the appropriate level. It provides a wide variety of interesting topics, and the short texts written with high-frequency vocabulary lend themselves well to several activities we have used successfully in our English classrooms. Our students enjoyed the topics, images, and hyperlinks to further information. We hope you will explore SEW and also find it useful in your classroom.

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## ONLINE RESOURCES FOR TEACHERS

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# READER'S GUIDE

**T**his guide is designed to enrich your reading of the articles in this issue. You may choose to read them on your own, taking notes or jotting down answers to the discussion questions below. Or you may use the guide to explore the articles with colleagues.

For example, many teachers discuss *Forum* at regularly scheduled meetings with department colleagues and members of teachers' groups, or in teacher-training courses and workshops. Often, teachers choose an article for their group to read before the meeting or class, then discuss that article when they meet. Teachers have found it helpful to take notes on articles or write a response to an article and bring that response to share in a discussion group. Another idea is for teachers to try a selected activity or technique described in one of the articles, then report back to the group on their experiences and discuss positives, negatives, and possible adaptations for their teaching context.

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## **The Art of Imitation: How to Use Outlines to Teach Rhetorical Prosody and Structure (Pages 2–13)**

### **Pre-Reading**

1. What do you think the authors mean by “the art of imitation”? To you, does *imitation* usually have a positive connotation or a negative connotation?
  2. Do you use outlines in your teaching? Do your students? What are some benefits of using outlines?
  3. How well do you think you understand “rhetorical prosody and structure”? Can you explain the concept(s) in a sentence or two?
  4. What would you, as a teacher, expect to gain by reading this article?
1. do you feel more comfortable teaching? In what ways does it make sense to teach them together rather than separately?
  3. The authors say that they “promote imitation of talks in both spoken and written work,” and they provide reasons for this and suggestions for how teachers can do it. In your opinion, what are some benefits of using imitation in the way the authors describe? Are there any drawbacks that you can think of?
  4. After reading the article, will you make this kind of imitation, as presented by the authors, part of your approach to teaching rhetoric?
  5. Are there uses and benefits to imitation that the authors do not mention in the article?
  6. Table 1 gives step-by-step guidelines for using outlining. Try this procedure with your students. During the process and afterward, join them in reflecting on the experience. Is their reaction similar to yours? Together, discuss ways to enhance the experience next time you try it.

### **Post-Reading**

1. The authors say, “While the mechanics of academic writing and grammar are taught to L2 English learners, the rhetorical elements of prosody do not appear to be commonly taught.” Do you agree that this is true? If so, what are some reasons?
2. The article provides suggestions for helping students develop rhetorical prosody and structure. Which—prosody or structure—

## Simple English Wikipedia: Free Resources for Beginner to Intermediate Levels (Pages 14–21)

### Pre-Reading

1. How easy or difficult is it for you to find new texts (and other content) that are appropriate for your students' level of ability in English?
2. Are you familiar with Simple English Wikipedia?
3. How much experience do you have using Wikipedia or Simple English Wikipedia? Have you ever used either of them in your teaching?
4. What is your attitude toward students' use of Wikipedia?
3. Pick out five terms or topics that are relevant to your students and to your teaching. Look each of them up on Simple English Wikipedia. How many of the terms could you find entries for? Did you find a text that you can use right away in your teaching?
4. In Figure 3, the authors show how a text can be used to highlight a specific grammar point (in this case, past-tense verbs). Choose a passage from a Simple English Wikipedia article and highlight a grammar point you teach. Then provide the same passage, or a similar one, to your students and have them do the highlighting. Repeat with a different passage. What are the results? What benefits do students get from this kind of "noticing" exercise?

### Post-Reading

1. What do you think? Are you willing to give Simple English Wikipedia a try in your classroom?
2. Go back and reread the introductory section of the article (the first five or six paragraphs). In your opinion, how well do the authors explain the need for using Simple English Wikipedia? How well do they convince readers who might be skeptical about using Wikipedia or a related resource? How well do the authors explain what they will present in the article?
5. Try one of the authors' suggested procedures (for reading/vocabulary, grammar, or controlled writing). How effective and beneficial is the experience for you and your students? Does that make you more or less interested in trying one of the other procedures that the authors suggest?

## Media Circles: Lively, Learner-Led Lessons

by ADAM BRAZENAS

*Media circles* (MCs) are an adaptation of an extensive-reading activity popularly known as *literature circles* (Daniels 1994). Literature circles have been successful in general-education classes but have also gained traction in the field of English language teaching (ELT), particularly in Asian universities (Mark 2007; Shelton-Strong 2012). Literature circles can be thought of as a book club with specific roles assigned to each student in preparation for the discussion of literature. The overarching goal is to inspire a love for reading while encouraging students to engage in thoughtful discussion. MCs aim to accomplish similar goals, albeit by using audiovisual media in place of literary material.

MCs are inherently organic. With limited teacher guidance, students will engage with their peers, which will motivate them to ask each other for help or clarification, negotiate meaning, and ask open-ended questions in order to stimulate a dialogue. Moreover, the audiovisual materials chosen for the assignment should not be overly academic or technical. In fact, such materials would defeat the purpose of the activity. The idea is for students to be able to comprehend the material relatively comfortably, focusing on nuanced concepts such as idiomatic language, cultural idiosyncrasies, and the subtleties of the relationships between characters, and at the same time make connections between the content of the media and the real world. As such, MCs work best with intermediate L2 students or higher and can be especially

useful in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts, as they provide a much-needed opportunity for practicing the target language outside the classroom.

In my own case, MCs were used in a Chinese university oral English course. The students were not English majors, although all of them *did* major in another foreign language (e.g., French, Italian, or Russian). Therefore, these students were not lacking in language-learning strategies. As such, this learner-led activity was a major success; it can be adapted to suit the needs of less-experienced students with the aid of sufficient scaffolding by the instructor.

### PROCEDURE

For this activity, just as with literature circles, students will form groups of five and assign specific roles (Daniels 2002). Next, rather than reading a literary selection, students will view one episode of a TV series chosen by the instructor as *homework*. The choice of series is at the discretion of the instructor. However, a few series I suggest are *Boy Meets World*, *Smart Guy*, *Family Matters*, *Full House*, *Even Stevens*, *Lizzie McGuire*, *Friends*, *Stranger Things*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Fresh Off the Boat*. (Many of these shows can be found on YouTube, and most episodes are only 20 to 25 minutes long.) These shows are relatively wholesome, and the content typically involves young people coming of age and dealing with issues at school, with friends, and with family. These experiences ring true for our students. Of

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## The key difference between literature circles and MCs is that the assignment becomes an interactive auditory and visual experience as opposed to involving extensive reading.

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course, instructors should preview episodes before assigning them to make sure the content is appropriate for the local culture and learning context.

The key difference between literature circles and MCs is that the assignment becomes an interactive auditory and visual experience as opposed to involving extensive reading. It is crucial that the material chosen be a narrative format. The rationale behind choosing a TV series is that the narrative is divided cleanly into episodic events that can be followed on a weekly basis. Furthermore, the dialogue between characters provides realistic representations of the English language and phrases that students can incorporate into their own speech patterns. It has been my experience that students can hardly wait to view the next episode, so it is best—if possible—to make MCs at least a weekly occurrence to minimize the possibility of students jumping ahead into the storyline and then having to revisit stale materials. Alternatively, MCs could be done on a monthly basis by using less-linear video resources so that students need not refrain from jumping ahead in the plot of a storyline that interests them. It is advisable in some cases to have students rewatch episodes in order to increase their exposure to the materials; MCs discussions inspire more-passionate responses when the material is fresh in the students' minds.

Each of the five group members will have a specific purpose to fulfill while viewing the assigned episode and will collect data, based on the assigned roles, to be presented in the group discussion. The episode is to be viewed as homework and then discussed during the following week. The purpose of this is to maximize student talking time (STT) and give students the liberty to watch the material

at whatever pace they need. Students have reported to me that they like to watch the episode once through for comprehension before attempting to fulfill their assigned tasks. Students negotiate and assign roles within their own groups, and their contribution to the group discussion will largely be based upon these assigned roles (Daniels 2002). The purpose of the discussion is not to come to any predetermined conclusions, but to allow students to share their reactions and the information they prepared in their assigned roles. The roles are as follows:

1. *Summarizer*: responsible for giving or eliciting an oral summary of the video
2. *Word master*: responsible for choosing new, important, and/or interesting words and multiword expressions to share, define, and contextualize
3. *Scene selector*: chooses key scenes, explains reasons for the choices, and offers and elicits comments
4. *Connector*: makes connections between real-life people and events with the story content and prepares questions to invite similar comments
5. *Cultural collector*: looks for cultural similarities and differences between the story and the local culture or the culture of the group members, brings them to light, and invites comments through questions to circle members

Keep in mind that when classes cannot be evenly divided into groups, some roles can be combined. Perhaps the most reasonable combination would be the roles of summarizer and scene selector, as they overlap rather well.

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## The teacher’s role during the group discussions should remain primarily observational.

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When students view and collect information to share in a discussion, it is important that they note the time stamp of an event in the episode. For example, if the word master chooses the word *crush*, he or she should include the minute and second [21:07] that the word is uttered. If a team member is choosing a larger scene from an episode, a time range may also be appropriate—for example, “the bus ride [16:32–19:09].”

The teacher’s role during the group discussions should remain primarily observational. It can be tempting to take control of the class or participate actively in discussions, but that would reduce STT as well as undermine the unique interpretations that students bring to bear. In addition, allowing students to negotiate meaning and conduct their own discussions places MCs in the categories of both task-based learning and the communicative approach. Nevertheless, the teacher should not play *too* passive a role, instead making sure to move about the class to listen for common issues, help with difficulties in pronunciation, and answer questions as needed.

The group discussions may last anywhere from ten to 20 minutes, depending on the comfort level and ability of the students. Teachers might be tempted to scaffold this activity, but experience has shown that scaffolding tends to diminish the autonomy of the students, which is a key aspect of MCs. However, during the first few sessions, my students found it helpful to first meet with members of other groups who performed the same homework task as themselves. By hearing the interpretations of the task by others, students were able to make the adjustments in future sessions. It is best not to let discussions run too long, though, as some students might get off task and lose interest in the activity.

The teacher may choose to extend the activity by holding a whole-class discussion of the episode after the groups finish sharing or by preparing materials to fill gaps in understanding. That is to say, teachers may view the episode and select idiomatic or colloquial language to share with students, point out subtle real-life connections, or explain cultural behaviors that would not likely be salient to students without aid. Teachers would be wise, however, to save such supplementary presentations for the end of the discussions, as doing so will prevent students from feeling that their answers and impressions deviate too much from the teacher’s, potentially resulting in feelings of inadequacy.

### EVALUATION

Teachers should keep in mind what the goals of this activity are—and perhaps more importantly what they are not. Some teachers may look for a way to weave this activity into their own curriculum, depending on how much flexibility they have. For example, a unit about families might be supported by assigning an episode or two of *Boy Meets World*, *Full House*, or *Family Matters*. However, this activity is really meant to be supplementary and universal. If the activity becomes too structured, and if the teacher takes too active a role, many of the benefits will be lost. MCs should put students at ease and encourage independence and exploration. Many of my own students reported that they felt their ability to derive meaning from the episodes, as well as their note-taking skills, was greatly enhanced.

As such, there does not necessarily need to be much accountability for the materials from discussions. For example, teachers might consider how to hold their students accountable for vocabulary that was uncovered as a result of MCs. If accountability is a major concern, small quizzes might be given each

week to account for the previous week's task. On the other hand, as this is designed to be a supplementary activity, the addition of quizzes may take away even more precious class time. Likewise, additional homework assignments related to MCs may remove the joy of such an activity in the first place.

## LIMITATIONS

There are a few limitations to be mindful of. First of all, selecting appropriate viewing materials can be tricky. Teachers need to use their judgment and aim for materials that will not be overly challenging for comprehension. It is often the case that there is a range of skill levels in a given classroom. By choosing materials that are convoluted or technical, all but the most dedicated students may struggle to comprehend the content, lose interest in the activity, or be unable to contribute meaningfully to discussions. Materials should be on the easier end of the spectrum so that comprehension is not the main issue; instead, higher-order thinking skills, cultural aspects, and idiomatic language should take precedence. I recommend looking for shows that involve children or teenagers, as the language they use will be somewhat universal, and the issues the characters encounter more relatable to the students.

Should students be allowed to use subtitles when they watch the episodes? Are English-only subtitles appropriate? These questions will be for individual teachers to answer based on their own specific class contexts. Not allowing subtitles would make MCs a more listening-focused activity; this would also encourage a more holistic understanding of the episode. On the other hand, the lack of subtitles would make completing the assigned roles more troublesome for some students. Alternatively, the use of subtitles removes the necessity of intense listening but allows for a deeper understanding of vocabulary in real time, allows students to identify and search for unfamiliar words, and reduces feelings of anxiety for lower-level students. It also removes some of the pressure on the teacher to be as exact when choosing the appropriate level of difficulty for the TV series.

Another possible limitation is access to the viewing materials. Teachers and students in certain countries may not have access to various websites, making the activity more difficult for students to complete. In these cases, teachers would do well to acquire the files and distribute them to students by email or by USB drive. In situations where students do not have Internet access, teachers will inevitably be limited in the selection of viewing materials.

## CONCLUSION

MCs support student autonomy and foster meaningful interaction with the target language, both in and out of the classroom. Students collaborate and develop teamwork skills while exploring the language in a highly contextualized environment, which improves motivation, enhances retention, and promotes fluency. The use of MCs in English-language classrooms is desirable not only for its stimulation of language acquisition, but for its compatibility with acceptable ELT practices—not to mention that the activity is highly enjoyable.

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# Teaching Register to EFL Writers: Formality and Deference in Written Communication

by RICHARD SCHLIGHT

While teaching written communication to international business school students in Korea last year, I received the following email: *I am Judy. Why my grade so low???? i study hard. please help me professor!!!!!!* I didn't despair because my course would soon cover email formatting, thoroughness and clarity, and common surface-level errors to avoid. Nonetheless, I decided to use the email as a learning opportunity and, having changed the sender's name, gave my students a few minutes of class time to rewrite it. In addition to following appropriate email conventions, they were expected to supply the real or contrived details required for a meaningful and coherent message.

Generally, the results were good. Many students managed to provide specific details about why they were writing the email. Some asked that they be permitted to retake the quiz that had led to the initial email. Students were also more careful with case and grammar than the original sender had been, and most supplied the requisite email components.

I found it more interesting, however, to analyze the range in tone. Several students noticed that the initial email had been too informal and came off as aggressive. Some overcompensated by writing excessively formal missives; one addressed the recipient as "Your Excellency"! A few included flatteries that were just plain obsequious (e.g., "All of the other professors here should learn from you"). A few students used imperatives like

"Let me take the quiz again" or declaratives like "I want to take the quiz again." These constructions would have worked well in the L1, with an appropriate honorific attached, but seemed too blunt for English language communication.

The problem, of course, was an inability to write in a register that was appropriate to the communicative task and cultural context. Register is an amorphous construct, but for our purposes, it describes the balance between formality, deference, and the appropriateness of a writer's style to a given text. Finding the correct register for a text is a complex endeavor that includes, among other factors, sentence structure and word choice. But it also involves decisions about formality and whether to assume a deferential tone or to take a more authoritative stance.

One problem that quickly emerged when I introduced the topic of register was that students had difficulty distinguishing between formality and deference. One student asked, "Aren't they the same thing?" Her question made sense because, in many languages, deference is so closely linked to formality. For example, the Korean honorifics pronounced *yo*, *seyo*, and *imnida* illustrate a progression from everyday polite, but not deferential usage, to usage that is both very polite and very deferential. Deference in English, on the other hand, requires no system of honorific suffixes and can be expressed with informal and even impolite constructions. With this in mind, I designed a lesson and an assignment

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## The problem ... was an inability to write in a register that was appropriate to the communicative task and cultural context.

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around formality and deference in American English with a focus on writing. What follows is a general outline that may, of course, be altered as you see fit.

Both formality and deference are easier to identify than to define, but it's a good idea to initially define *formality* as a rigid adherence to social conventions and *deference* as an attitude of submission displayed by one party to another. Before you move into the sphere of writing, it might help your students to discuss formality in clothing, ceremonies, speech, and other realms. Mention to your students that many manifestations of formality serve little or no purpose beyond following established custom. Provide examples such as the necktie and the phrase "ladies and gentlemen."

When you feel ready to narrow your discussion of formality to language, forms of address make a good place to begin. Ask your students to explain how, in their countries of origin, an employee would typically address his or her boss. How would a university student address a professor? Explain that, in the United States, the informal first name is often used but that the general assumption is that the person being addressed, be it employer, professor, or even employee or student, is in many cases entitled to determine how he or she is addressed. If students are curious, you can introduce a question such as, "How would you like to be addressed?" and a possible response: "Please call me Sally."

A good way to introduce deference is to explain that it functions within social hierarchies. Children typically show deference

to their parents and to their elders in general. Students show deference to their teachers, employees show deference to their employers, and so on. As soon as your students understand this concept, however, it is important to introduce the nuances. Deference can be situational, and you may try asking your students to imagine situations in which deference is temporarily inverted (that is, when the person who is higher in the social hierarchy defers to a person who would, in usual circumstances, occupy a lower rank). I give the examples of a boss asking an employee to work all weekend and the professor who must apologize to a student for missing an appointment.

Economic relationships play a huge role in deference levels. A company president may show deference to a lower-level worker employed by that company's customer. Borrowers often show deference to lenders, and salespeople show deference to potential customers. Ask students to consider situations in which they may show deference when interacting with friends in their L1. In what situations does this arise? In what ways is deference shown? My own students provided the examples of asking for a loan from a friend and (jokingly, I hope) begging to copy a classmate's homework assignment. Tone of voice was cited as the most common way of showing deference in conversation.

The next activity is intended to activate schema and serve as a comprehension check. It should also get students thinking about the many ways in which levels of formality and deference are expressed through language.

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Show film clips and ask your students to rate the interactions in terms of formality and deference (high or low). If you'd like more than just spoken assurances that your students understand the concept, you might consider designing a simple graphic with an  $x$  and  $y$  axis on which learners could gauge characters' deference and formality levels, marking the spot. I find it useful to show clips in which there is a great disparity between the two characters. One scene from the 1964 film *Goldfinger* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DoQwKe0lggw>), for example, depicts the villain addressing James Bond as "Mr. Bond" and using other formal language as he prepares to slice Mr. Bond with a laser beam. Ask your students whether the Goldfinger character's speech is high or low in deference and formality and, more importantly, what makes it so. Another clip you can play is from the 2010 movie *The Losers* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9lhxdc2RbIE>). In this scene, a couple of commandos show informal deference while apologizing to each other.

At this stage, consolidate what you've covered and elicit from your students the various elements that constitute formality and deference. They should understand that formal language tends not to use casual or impolite vocabulary, that people address one another differently in formal speech, and that formal speech reflects verbal convention more than does everyday speech. Deference is more difficult to break down, but you can explain that expressions of gratitude and apology are often longer and less direct than they need to be from a strictly functional standpoint. Deference is common when a lower-status individual asks a higher-status individual for something. Your students should understand the difference between *may I* and *can I* (a construction like "May I leave work early?" is

implicitly more deferential than "Can I go home now?"). They should likewise be familiar with constructions like "Would it be possible for me to leave work early today?" and "Is there any way you would be able to let me go early today?" Before moving on to the next segment, be sure that your students understand that standards of formality are not completely rigid and that they may encounter exceptions.

It's time now to narrow your discussion of formality and deference to written communication. Put students into groups and provide writing samples for discussion. I like to provide hypothetical scenarios and ask my students which of two texts, in a given context, functions better in terms of register. Here is the sort of scenario you might design:

*Ted Smith and his family have just moved into a middle-class American suburb near the house of Jim Jones. Both men are 42 years old, and both work in the insurance business. Jim comes home one day to find that his expensive motorcycle is missing. He looks at the footage from his garage security camera and sees Ted's son breaking into the garage and sneaking out with the motorcycle. Jim considers telephoning the police but decides to first give Ted and his son the opportunity to return the motorcycle. Jim wants a record of the communication, so he finds Ted's email address and sends an email.*

Having read and understood the scenario, your students can now analyze the following excerpts from two emails Jim Jones might write. Students should discuss formality and deference levels, how they arrived at determining these levels, and which excerpt they think is more appropriate.

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**Students should discuss formality and deference levels,  
how they arrived at determining these levels,  
and which excerpt they think is more appropriate.**

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*... Mr. Smith, my security camera caught your son breaking into my garage and stealing my motorcycle. I will notify the police if the motorcycle is not returned immediately. ...*

*... Mr. Smith, I know that raising a son nowadays can be a challenge. Unfortunately, it seems that yours took my motorcycle from my garage without permission. Would it be possible for you to return it to me? ...*

I'd like students to conclude, after considering the above examples, that a reasonable degree of formality is called for in this scenario, but that Jim Jones has a serious complaint to make and only the smallest amount of deference would be justified.

Before moving to the homework assignment, I'll provide a scenario for discussion from the business arena (depending on the size of your class, you could think about assigning students to smaller discussion groups). One person asks another to submit a tax form by a specified date. The two versions are as follows:

*Dear Sir or Madam,*

*You are required to submit the H4 form by August 15. Failure to do so will result in legal action.*

*Sincerely yours,*

*Jack Straw*

*Hi Shannon,*

*I'm so sorry to bother you again, but I must remind you that your H4 form*

*is due on August 15. I would hate to see you facing any kind of penalty for such a small matter.*

*Thanks,*

*Jack*

After rating deference and formality in each of these messages, students can speculate about the nature of the relationships between the sender and recipient. You might want to use these examples to explain that ultimatums can be direct or tacit, informal or formal, and even deferential when constructed to be so. In the second tax-form example, point out the empathetic language and more indirect threat of penalty.

If you feel, at this point, that your students are ready to begin writing, then move on to explaining the assignment. If not, you can provide additional scenarios and ask them to practice writing short, appropriate messages. Delicate scenarios in which one party needs to complain work well. Consider an individual who wants her neighbor to do something about a relentlessly barking dog or a restaurant patron who wants his hospital bills reimbursed after suffering food poisoning.

The assignment is intended to give students an opportunity to exercise what they learned in the register segment and to help teachers assess the extent to which students understand and can apply the concepts covered. I change the assignment from semester to semester to discourage plagiarism, but the basic idea is that students are given a scenario card and asked to write an email in response to the hypothetical situation in which I have placed them. A sample scenario card for less advanced students is as follows:

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**Ultimatums can be direct or tacit, informal or formal,  
and even deferential when constructed to be so.**

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*Yesterday, you received the new smartphone that you had ordered over the Internet. The make and model of your phone is Xanadu X35. You ordered the phone from Rainforest Electronics. You had ordered the blue version of the phone but received a pink model. More seriously, the phone's battery lasts for only an hour or so before requiring recharging. Write a complaint email to Rainforest Electronics asking them how they want to solve this problem.*

A scenario card for more-advanced students is as follows:

*You are a successful architect. You have been approached by representatives of billionaire Mildred Moneybags. Ms. Moneybags wants you to design and build a castle on her recently acquired land in Tuscany. The problem is that Ms. Moneybags is notorious as an ill-tempered and dishonest client. Not only this, but you don't like her taste in architecture. Your task is to decline the job in such a way as to protect Ms. Moneybags' ego while leaving open the possibility that referrals to projects from*

*her wealthy friends might be forthcoming. You are expected to come up with creative solutions, to tactfully decline the offer, and to draft complete and appropriate emails to be sent to your teacher's inbox as though he or she were Mildred Moneybags.*

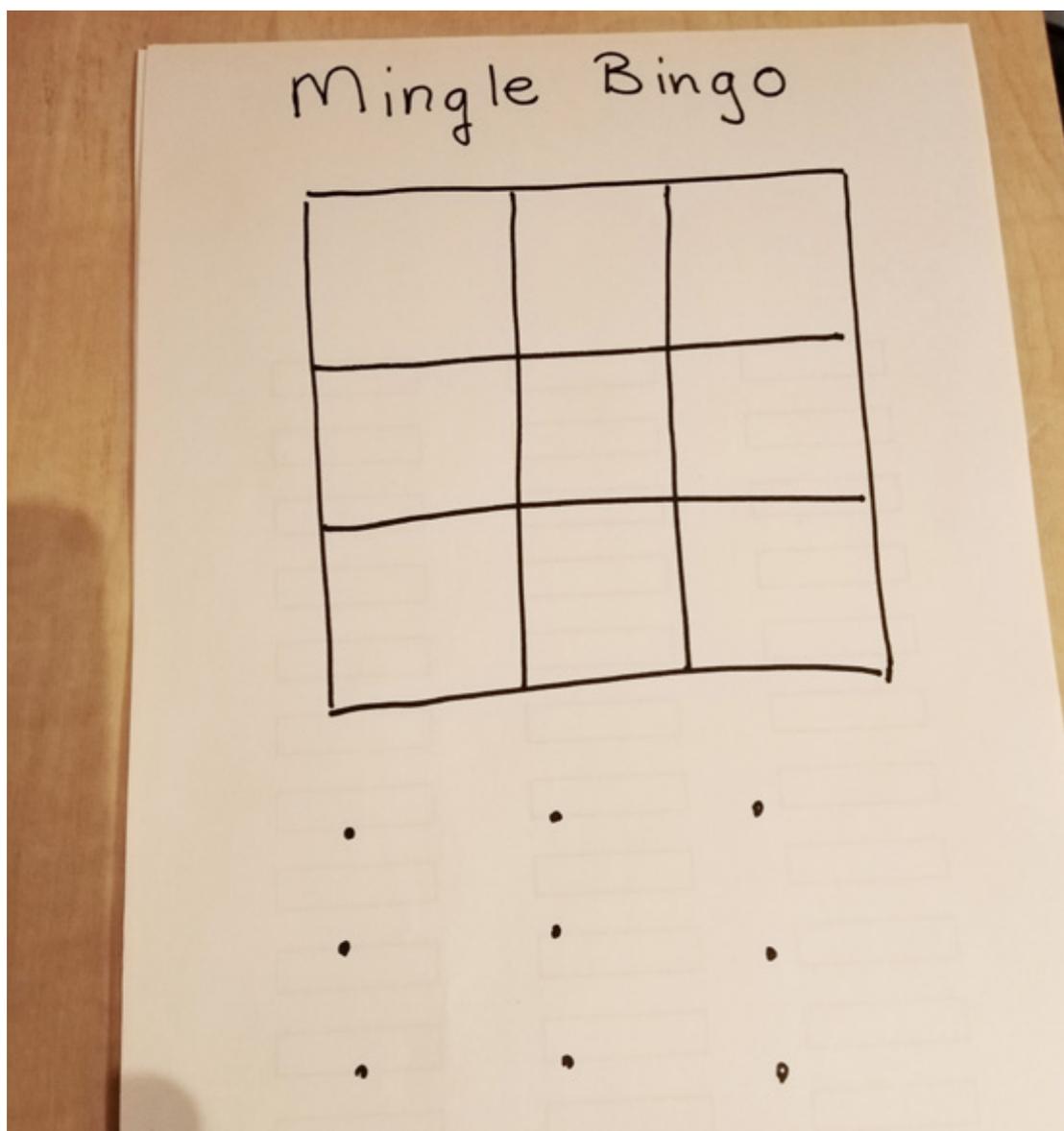
Your grading rubric can contain many criteria. My rubrics allocate points for inclusion of the necessary components (e.g., subject line, pleasantries, salutation), level of deference, level of formality, clarity, creative solution, format, and mechanical soundness. The above exercise is intended for relatively advanced English writers, so be sure that your students know how to structure a simple and complete email before introducing them to deference and formality.

I hope that this lesson works for you and your students.

**Richard Schlight** is currently an English Language Fellow posted to Baku, Azerbaijan. Richard has taught academic writing for ten years and, prior to arriving in Baku, directed the Writing Center at SolBridge International School of Business in Daejeon, South Korea.

# Mingle Bingo

by SUZAN ARRER AND ALIYA SADUOVNA ZHOLDABAYEVA



**A blank chart, with nine dots underneath. Students will write information about themselves beside each dot; then, in each square, they will write the name of a classmate and one piece of information about that classmate.**

Mingle Bingo is a classic mingle activity in that it involves a face-to-face exchange of information between classmates, with learners chatting simultaneously and then reporting their findings to the entire group. The bingo aspect adds an element of fun. Mingle Bingo can be used as an icebreaker in

one of your first encounters with a group—it is great for learning new names—but it can also be repeated on a regular basis to reinforce structures or vocabulary (see the Variations section near the end of this article). It can be adjusted to become an engaging activity for learners of all proficiency levels.

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Mingle Bingo requires practically no preparation on the part of the teacher other than to decide what purpose the activity should serve at that particular time for that particular learning level. Here, we will describe using Mingle Bingo as an icebreaker, so imagine that this is our first class. Learner level for the example we use is intermediate, although the activity can be used with upper-beginner and advanced learners as well. In any case, students are sharing real-life information with classmates, face-to-face, in a low-stress but active environment.

With smaller classes (about 15 students), the activity can take up to 90 minutes with information being shared about all students. Suggestions for using the activity with larger classes can be found at the end of the Procedure section. The only materials required are one blank A4 sheet of paper per learner and something to write with, along with a whiteboard and markers (or a chalkboard and chalk).

### PREPARATION

Students get a blank piece of paper and draw a chart on the top half—just a big square (about 7 inches by 7 inches) that is divided into nine smaller boxes, with three boxes across and three boxes down. Underneath the chart, students make nine dots, one under the other (bullet points). See the photo on page 33 for an example.

The teacher asks students to think of nine bits of information about themselves and to write one piece of information next to each bullet point. Students should list only one or two words or a phrase, not full sentences. (See the photo on page 35.) To get students

thinking, the teacher can offer prompts, orally or on the board, such as favorite foods, pets, family, hobbies, and so on. The information should ideally be things that others do not yet know about the person. At the same time, it should not be too personal, as the information will be shared with the class. Discourage students from writing down information that is already clear, such as “I am learning English” and “I am a student.” After everyone has nine bits of information listed at the bullet points, Mingle Bingo can begin!

### PROCEDURE

Step 1 involves preparing students to exchange information. The teacher writes key language on the board:

*Hello, I'm [name]. Nice to meet you. ...*

*Nice to meet you, too! (Or Likewise!) ...*

*Can you tell me something about yourself?*

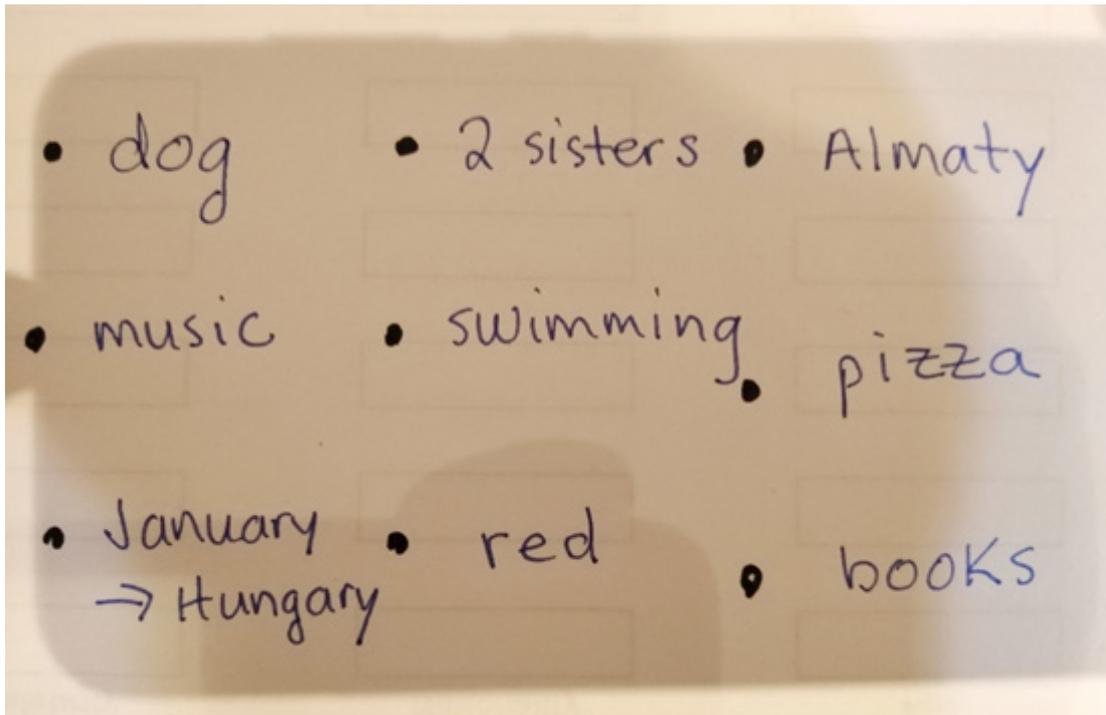
The teacher chooses one student to come to the front of the class and provides a demonstration of how the exchange will work when the activity begins. An example might go like this:

Teacher: Hello, I'm Sally Jones. ... What's your name?

Student: Hello. I'm Anargul. Nice to meet you.

Teacher: Likewise! Can you tell me something about yourself, Anargul?

Student: Yes. I have two sisters.



**Nine bits of information that a student has written about herself; she will share these bits, one by one, with classmates during the mingle.**

Teacher (*writes student's name in first box of chart and adds the information received—"two sisters"*): Really? What are their names?

Student: Gulsana and Aygul.

Anargul then asks the teacher, "Can you tell me something about yourself?" When the teacher responds, Anargul uses her own chart to note down the information she receives.

After names and information have been recorded in the chart, the teacher checks to make sure the procedure is clear. If necessary, the teacher can ask two other students to conduct a similar "encounter" in front of the class. It is important that the students understand that they give *different* information to each person they chat with—and that they give just one piece of information to each person.

Step 2 is having students mingle and exchange information. When the teacher is confident that the students know what to do, all students stand up and mingle throughout the classroom. Once they have chatted with nine people and their chart is completed with nine different names, they may return to their seats.

In Step 3, students share the information they have gathered about their classmates. If possible, students should sit in a large circle so that everyone can see one another. To demonstrate the next step, the teacher begins, referring to his or her chart.

Teacher: I talked to Anargul. She said she has two sisters. Their names are Gulsana and Aygul. (*On the chart, the teacher demonstratively crosses out the block with Anargul's name.*) Who else talked to Anargul?

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**Students are sharing real-life information with classmates, face-to-face, in a low-stress but active environment.**

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**It is important that the students understand that they give different information to each person they chat with—and that they give just one piece of information to each person.**

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Student 1: I talked to Anargul. She told me she doesn't like pizza. (*Student 1 may now cross off Anargul's name on his or her chart.*)

Student 2: Anargul said she plays volleyball. (*Student 2 crosses off Anargul's name.*)

Student 3: Anargul has a boyfriend in Shymkent. (*Student 3 crosses off Anargul's name.*)

Students 4 through 9 continue with information about Anargul. Each time a student speaks up and says what he or she has learned about Anargul, that student can cross off Anargul's name on his or her chart.

The teacher explains that when three names *in a row* are crossed off, students can call out "Bingo!" (Teachers can decide whether to award a small prize or whether it's enough to write "BINGO Winners" on the board and list the winners' names underneath.) "In a row" can be horizontal, vertical, or diagonal. Students who call out "Bingo!" must repeat the names of their "Bingo people," gesturing or nodding to them. Doing this helps students remember names in the new group. After some time, when there have been several BINGOs, the teacher can change the rules and explain: "Now we will play for the full card. Whoever has *every* name crossed off can call 'Bingo!' and is the grand champion!"

As mentioned above, sharing obtained information on 15 learners, plus the teacher, should take about 90 minutes. For bigger groups, two (or more) circles can be formed, with students put in charge of each group and the teacher moving back and forth between groups. Or the sharing-information step can be carried over to the next class meeting.

#### **FOLLOW-UP**

The teacher can take notes on vocabulary and grammar that students produce and may want to discuss these items during a follow-up class. In any case, associations between students' names and information provided will help everyone remember who is who, long after the activity is over.

#### **VARIATIONS**

Mingle Bingo can be adjusted according to learners' needs. It can focus on one structure (e.g., *have/has/doesn't have*). Students could list nine things that they have or don't have, then share that information with their classmates. When reporting time comes, it sounds like this:

Student 1: I talked to Anargul. She has two sisters.

Student 2: Anargul also has a dog.

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**Associations between students' names and information provided will help everyone remember who is who, long after the activity is over.**

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Student 3: Anargul said she does not have a car.

Student 4: Anargul has a blue phone.

And so on.

Other structures that could be selected for practice include *likes ... /doesn't like ... ; wants to ... ; and can ... /can't ...* . A focus could also be placed on vocabulary groups, such as pets, vegetables, animals, and sports. The possibilities are endless!

**Suzan Arrer** is a 2019–2020 English Language Fellow (ELF) at Pavlodar State Pedagogical University in Kazakhstan, where **Aliya Saduovna Zholdabayeva** is her counterpart and head of the Foreign Languages Department. They cooperatively presented this activity as part of a workshop entitled “Get Them Talking!” at the ELF 50th Anniversary Celebration in Almaty, Kazakhstan, in November 2019.

Photos by Suzan Arrer

# MY CLASSROOM

# COTE D'IVOIRE

In the busy classroom of the International University of Grand-Bassam (IUGB), Instructor Mohamed Lekrama, no matter the unit or discussion in progress, is guided by a powerful principle: reflection. It resides in the eager eyes and smiles of his students, the words that they craft, and the pauses that ensue. It prods and often propels his students outside of their comfort zones. Reflection, according to Mr. Lekrama, is a simple but transformative tool. He draws on the work of the linguist Earl W. Stevick: “Success depends less on materials, techniques, and linguistic analyses, and more on what goes on inside and between people in the classroom” (Stevick 1998, 119).



Mohamed Lekrama stands in front of the entrance to the International University of Grand-Bassam.

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## Reflection, according to Mr. Lekrama, is a simple but transformative tool.

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Delving into that communicative space that exists between teacher, student, and the subject material is at the core of the pedagogy of this Mauritania-born teacher, who first came to Cote d'Ivoire in 2017 after many classroom journeys of his own. Since his first English class in 2000 at the age of 14, he was motivated to learn English, a language then revered in Mauritania as the language of globalization. He was fortunate to have a teacher who, unlike many he had previously encountered, encouraged him in his learning. Together, these things helped him prevail after his college graduation in 2009, when he was under pressure to choose a career considered more befitting a male from a middle-class family, such as the military. Teaching, although a respected vocation, was not encouraged by his family due to its relatively low pay. Mr. Lekrama continued to be resolute, driven by a desire to try in his own small way to instigate a positive change in education in his country. Upon reflection nearly 20 years later, he offers, "I think the reason I wanted to be a teacher is because I wanted to be a different teacher than the ones I have experienced myself as a learner."

The educational context Mr. Lekrama experienced as a student didn't always encourage creativity and intellectual freedom, and it is the antithesis of the one he now strives to foster at IUGB. This university's reputation for preparing students for the U.S.-style academic system, together with the opportunity for him to develop quality tertiary-level teaching experience, attracted him to IUGB and Cote d'Ivoire.

Nestled in the heart of Grand-Bassam, a UNESCO town that was once the French colonial capital on the southeast coast, IUGB opened in 2005 as the first American-style university in the country. With generally small class sizes, IUGB is a popular choice for international students. Of a current total of 829 students, it attracts an eclectic collection of cultural backgrounds (students from 22 nations that besides Cote d'Ivoire include Burkina Faso, Ghana, and Lebanon) and affords Mr. Lekrama and his students a culturally rich platform upon which to learn from one another. Currently teaching sections of Grammar, Oral Communication, and Listening, Mr. Lekrama explains that for him, his role is so much more than being solely



A view of the campus at IUGB



Mr. Lekrama engages with students in his grammar class during a small-group activity.

an “expert” in a particular field; as a teacher, it is not enough to simply know the “whats” of one’s material. He believes that a teacher who is going to dynamize a communicative classroom must plunge deeper into the reflective process. It begins with asking: “Why am I teaching this?”

It might sound simple enough, almost too obvious a question. Teachers in Cote d’Ivoire (and around the world) struggle to catch their breath with overloaded schedules and excessive classroom sizes (in Cote d’Ivoire, public secondary-school classrooms can have more than 100 students), let alone find time to reflect.

However, by taking time to think about his purpose as a teacher and ask more “whys” and “hows,” Mr. Lekrama finds that whole new dimensions can open up. His self-reflection

includes asking: “What is my purpose for teaching this? What is my end goal? Is it simply because *this* is on the required syllabus and *this* is what I have to teach in 45 minutes? Or is there a deeper purpose? What if how I teach the required material could also elicit a more creative thought process with my students? How might I do that?”

Mr. Lekrama has found that the process has enhanced his sense of self-awareness as a teacher and, in turn, positively impacts his students. For example, when encouraged to reflect on the whys and the hows of their own learning process (e.g., “Why am I studying the real conditional? How can I apply this new knowledge?”), students are more likely to make connections with the learning material and each other. It also mitigates some of the challenges that he faces as a teacher.

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**“What if how I teach the required material could also elicit a more creative thought process with my students? How might I do that?”**

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## “With reflection on content, it is not about the activity but what we can do with it.”

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One such is that many of his students are accustomed to a classroom culture focused on rote learning. Mr. Lekrama can indeed have his work cut out when trying to encourage his learners to engage in critical thinking and reflection. By virtue of their past experiences, they expect that as the teacher, he will do the “thinking work.”

But observe one of Mr. Lekrama’s classes and you will see a prepared facilitator making sure that thinking work is shared. Take a simple grammar concept such as the real conditional. During an 80-minute class in this airy and spacious classroom, it is easy for the students to forget the bustling, sand-covered streets steps from the tended campus lawn and their classroom window. The sounds from the overpacked minibuses, the ubiquitous “woro woro” (orange taxis that have seen better days), and vendors all disappear as an exciting collaborative group discussion ensues. It is about scientific truths, and it begins with Mr. Lekrama, as he writes on the whiteboard:

*If you heat ice, it melts.*

**Mr. Lekrama:** What scientific truths do you know that are similar to this?

**Student 1:** If you breathe in the sea, you die.

**Mr. Lekrama:** Good. If we take in air under water, we die. Is this a scientific truth?

**Student 2:** Yes, because you die.

**Mr. Lekrama:** So, how we use language gives us different meanings and truths?

The above is just a snapshot, but it shows how Mr. Lekrama brings to life a collaborative dialog. He takes a grammar concept and encourages his learners to actively reflect upon the grammatical tenet, making their own

meaning by contributing and sharing their understanding. They see grammar less as a set of rules and more as a way of autonomously expressing themselves.

Mr. Lekrama is inspired by the applied linguistics scholar Diane Larsen-Freeman and her concept of “grammaring” (Larsen-Freeman 2014), where learning grammar is a dynamic and active process in which a learner strives to apply the grammatical tenets to real-world concepts. An example of how his teaching reflects this student-centered approach is a lesson he conducts on modal verbs. He starts by asking his learners (based on their background knowledge) to brainstorm all the modal verbs they know. Next, he gives his learners a relatable context and then a real-world freewriting task that they can relate to: *Imagine you work in a local hotel. Write a list of the guest rules at the hotel.* His objective as a teacher is to inject a degree of meaningfulness for his students. In their groups, whether they come up with, “Guests **must** check out before 11 a.m.” or “Guests **might** check out before 11 a.m.,” Mr. Lekrama asks them to reflect upon their choice of modal verb. For example, “Why did you choose *must*? What is your message to the guests by using that modal verb?” In this way, he contextualizes the content and gives learners a chance to use the language with no judgment—to reflect on their own language. As Mr. Lekrama says, “With reflection on content, it is not about the activity but what we can do with it.”

Like many educators in African francophone countries, Mr. Lekrama finds that he has to think creatively about ways to offer his learners the opportunity to practice English outside the formal classroom. Capitalizing on his students’ enjoyment of social media, he encourages them to “follow” and “like” pages that are exclusively English. The objective is that they will accrue more English feeds

on their social media “walls.” It is a simple example that epitomizes Mr. Lekrama’s viewpoint that there is power in the “small acts of language development.” What he shows his students through this and similar exercises is that big achievements such as mastering another language start with small steps.

Mr. Lekrama appreciates how his own incremental path as a learner has helped him develop as a teacher since he began his career in 2012. As an undergraduate student at the University of Nouakchott, Mauritania, he majored in English and English Literature. In those days, he felt he was not encouraged enough to critically think and reflect on his learning process. “By seeing what not to do in a classroom, I have learned what to do,” he says. He references a common saying heard by teachers in his native Mauritania, “My commodity is sent back to me.” For Mr. Lekrama, this statement, perhaps more fitting in a banking lexicon, conceives the teacher as a “depositor” and the student as “depository.” In this sense, the relationship maintained is that of domination dependence instead of creativity and independent learning.

He began to consolidate his belief in the importance of quality and humane education at Colorado College, where he taught Arabic, as the first Mauritanian Fulbright Language Teaching Assistant. Upon returning to Mauritania, he spent two years teaching English in the rural region of Adrar and realized that if he was going to have any degree of influential change in his profession, he needed more experience and formal training. Obtaining a second Fulbright scholarship, Mr. Lekrama pursued a master’s degree in TESOL from SIT Graduate Institute, formerly known as the School for International Training, something that today he calls “one of the best decisions I made in my life.”

Mr. Lekrama quickly embraced the focus on his role as a facilitator of learning. In that role, he is part of an ever-changing dynamic, a spacious triangle that is formed between *I* (the teacher), *thou* (his learners), and *it* (the subject matter); see Hawkins (2002) for more on this concept. The educational culture to which Mr. Lekrama had been so accustomed, emphasizing memorization and with little awareness of the thought capacities of that



Mr. Lekrama at his desk

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## There is a common denominator: teaching and learning are not separate entities.

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“depository,” was replaced by a shifting in thinking about the nature of learning.

At SIT, Mr. Lekrama was encouraged to step outside his comfort zone and learned to incorporate the word *humanistic* into his own pedagogical lexicon. He saw that real learning happens when his teaching style embraces the many dimensions of a learner—a human being (mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual).

Since then, he has been an active participant in national and local professional-development opportunities in Cote d’Ivoire. In 2019, he presented a workshop at the national teaching conference (CINELTA Conference) on The Grammar of Choice: From Rules to Reasons, where he brought to life the active process of Larsen-Freeman’s grammaring. He has also presented on Connecting Teaching to Learning: What, How & Why?, sharing with teachers the importance of being cognizant of the types of questions they ask their learners, and inviting them to consider the power of reflection, both as teachers and by encouraging it in their learners.

Locally, Mr. Lekrama has been an active co-facilitator of an English Teachers’ Club in Grand-Bassam. Started in 2019, this 25-member professional group of public secondary-school teachers is still in its nascence. However, the Saturday morning sessions have served as an opportunity for local teachers to share best practices and find a much-needed degree of community.

Whatever the topic, whatever the audience, there is a common denominator: teaching and learning are not separate entities. Stand in the doorway of one of his classes, and it is clear to see—and hear. They are merged in the soundtrack of reflection, be it noise or silence. They are part of an active, humanistic, and meaningful process, and for Mohamed

Lekrama, it is best discovered in all the many places in a classroom, “inside and between.”

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This article was written by **Elaine Kerry**, a U.S. Department of State English Language Fellow. She holds a Master of Arts in Writing from Northeastern University, Boston, Massachusetts. Currently, she teaches in the University Preparatory Program at International University of Grand-Bassam, Cote d’Ivoire.

Photos by Elaine Kerry

## Story Retelling with a Twist

**LEVEL:** Lower Intermediate and above

**TIME REQUIRED:** About 45 minutes

**GOALS:** To engage learners of all ages in listening and speaking practice; to have students comprehend and retell stories with a “twist”

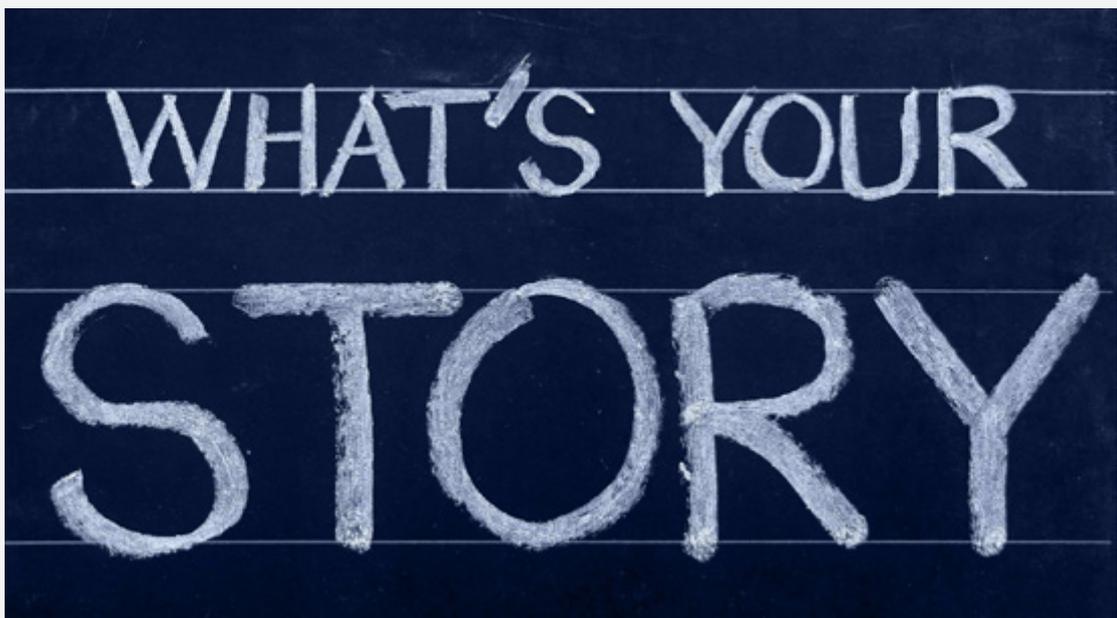
**MATERIALS:** One or more jokes or very short stories with a surprising ending

**OVERVIEW:** Who doesn't like to listen to a good story or a good-natured joke? Stories hold our attention, and in language classes, they allow students to listen to a model of extended and connected talk or discourse. However, mere exposure to extended discourse is not enough for production. This is the same for any skill. Most of us cannot simply watch someone dance and be able to replicate the moves without an instructor

breaking them down into steps. In addition, we need to put them all together to be able to enjoy and understand the dance.

So, too, with language: in order to move our students beyond words and sentences, we need to expose them to longer and longer stretches of connected speech and have them participate in this type of talk as well. Story retelling is a motivating way to extend our students' speech with a well-scaffolded structure.

Story Retelling with a Twist is a cooperative extended-discourse task with built-in scaffolding. With a few adjustments to fit age, language levels, and cultural contexts, this is a versatile activity that will motivate your whole class and keep students engaged. “Twists”—unexpected and surprising endings—pique student interest. I learned about the activity from a Hungarian



colleague while working as an English as a foreign language (EFL) teacher in Debrecen, Hungary. I have also used it with Hungarian university students, with Latin American and Polish adult immigrants in community-based programs in the United States, and with Mexican children in private elementary schools in central Mexico.

### PREPARATION:

1. Find a very short story or joke with a twist. Make sure the story or joke is at your students' listening level. A few examples are provided at the end of this article; you can adapt them if you need to.
2. Practice reading the story or joke so that you can read it fluently, with the correct timing for the twist at the end.
3. Identify potentially troubling grammar structures or new vocabulary. Decide how you will present these, whether with a quick drawing, gestures, the presentation of objects, or another method that you feel comfortable with. *Keep in mind that the activity works best if students are already familiar with the grammar and vocabulary in the story.*

### PROCEDURE:

1. Tell students, "I am going to tell you a story." Then add, "You must listen carefully. After I finish telling the story, you will tell the same story yourselves."
2. Divide the class into groups of no larger than four or five students. If it is not possible to move desks or for groups to go to another place in the room, make sure the group members are sitting next to one another.
3. Choose one person from each group to step outside the classroom. You could do this by specifying the person with the longest or shortest hair, the one whose birthday is next, or some other

distinguishing detail. These students will be the "storytellers." If it is not possible for students to go outside the room, give the storytellers a short task to complete as a group, such as a crossword puzzle or a word search.

4. After these students—the storytellers—are out of listening range, teach or review key vocabulary (and grammar, if necessary). Be sure to leave these words visible for easy reference during the group retelling. Again, you should try to keep new vocabulary and grammar points to a minimum.
5. Read the story once at a slow pace, and then read it again normally. It is important to *read* the story to make sure you tell it in exactly the same way each time. You may want to read it a third time if students insist. You may also want to ask a few comprehension questions. I don't allow my students to take notes in this activity because I want them to focus on listening only.
6. Call the storytellers back into the room and have them return to their groups.
7. The group members tell the story to their storyteller once or twice, as needed. Do not give them a copy of the story. Emphasize that everyone is responsible for telling the story to the storyteller in the group. To make sure this happens, you might want to give each group a talking piece that is passed around the group. No one can have another turn until each member has contributed something. If someone needs assistance, though, other group members may help.
8. Send all the storytellers out of the room again except for one, who will stand or sit in the front of the room.
9. Have this first storyteller retell the story or joke to the class.

10. Call the next storyteller into the room and repeat Step 9 until each storyteller has retold the story.
11. Have the class clap or snap after each retelling. You can have students who are listening let each storyteller know what he or she left out, as well as some things the storyteller did well.
12. An optional step is to give each group a few minutes to choose the best storyteller or storytelling group and to provide reasons for the choice.

### VARIATIONS

1. For large classes, after the storytellers have heard the story from their groups, have all the storytellers stay in the room but move to a different group to retell the story. You can repeat this process once.
2. At the beginning of the activity, divide the class into three groups. In this version, everyone stays in the room. As you tell the story, have one group write down nouns in the story, another group jot down verbs, and the third group write adjectives. Then allow members of the same group to compare notes before putting members from each grammar group together to reconstruct the story orally.
3. Follow up the activity by having each group write down the story with as much detail as possible.
4. Have each group come up with its own twist for the story. You could leave the twist ending out during the original telling. (You can consider doing this the second or third time you try the activity, after students are familiar with it.)
5. After several story-retelling sessions, have groups choose their favorite story to act out in front of the class, with props. They can write a script beforehand.

### Considerations for Choosing a Story

- Choose a story that you like. If you are genuinely enthusiastic about reading it, the students will be receptive.
- Make it short and lively. Although Variation 1 gives a suggestion for using the activity with large classes, it is not advisable to have too many groups retelling the same story. Hearing each group's version is fun, but five groups is the limit for a very short story or joke such as those included below.
- Stories with twists make listening fun and retelling motivating for your students.
- Simple stories are best. Choose stories at the students' listening and speaking level, not above. It is excellent practice for them to listen to an entire story and repeat it, especially if this is their first time doing so. Make sure you choose stories with no more than one or two new key words or phrases that are essential to understanding and telling the story.
- Find a culturally appropriate story. If you are not sure about this, ask someone from the culture and/or a supervisor.

### SAMPLE STORY AND JOKES

#### A Story: "The Lady and the Mouse"



**Mousetrap with cheese**

One day a lady went to her kitchen for a snack. When she opened her refrigerator, she saw a mouse running across the floor.

She was frightened of mice, so she screamed and stood on a chair. The mouse was frightened by the lady's scream, so it ran away. So the lady climbed down from the chair, took her purse, and went to the store to buy a mousetrap. The man at the store gave her a mousetrap and showed her how it works. He told her to put a piece of cheese in the trap.

When she got home, she realized that she didn't have any cheese in her refrigerator. So she cut out a picture of a piece of cheese from a magazine. After she set the trap, she turned off the light and went to bed. The next morning, she saw that the mousetrap had worked! Inside the trap, next to the picture of the piece of cheese, was a picture of a mouse!

#### A Joke: "The Duck and the Grapes"



**"Do you have any grapes?"**

A duck waddles into a convenience store and goes up to the cashier.

The cashier says, "Can I help you?"

The duck says, "Yes, please. Do you have any grapes?"

The cashier looks at him strangely and says, "No, I'm afraid we don't. You might want to go to the supermarket down the road."

The duck waddles away.

The next day at the same time, the duck waddles into the same convenience store and asks the same cashier, "Do you have any grapes?"

The cashier looks at the duck closely and says, "Hey! Weren't you the same duck that was here yesterday? Look, we don't have any grapes. OK? Like I said, there is a supermarket down the road."

The duck seems satisfied with the answer and waddles out the door and down the street.

The next day at the same time, the duck waddles into the same convenience store with the same cashier standing behind the counter.

The duck asks, "Excuse me, sir. Do you have any grapes?"

The cashier is visibly angry and yells, "Look. What's your problem? You came in here yesterday asking for grapes and I told you that WE DON'T HAVE ANY GRAPES! If you come in here again asking for grapes, I'm going to nail your beak to the counter. Now, GET OUT OF HERE!"

The duck's feathers are ruffled, and he quickly waddles out of the store and down the street.

The following day at the same time, the duck waddles into the same store and walks up to the same cashier, and the cashier says, "I told you to get out of here. What do you want?"

The duck asks, "Do you have any nails?"

The cashier shouts, "No, of course we don't have nails!"

And the duck replies, "So, do you have any grapes?"

## A Joke: “The Man and the Penguin”



**Penguins**

A man is driving down the highway with his pet penguin. He is driving fast, so he gets stopped by a police officer for speeding. As the officer hands the man a speeding ticket, she notices that he has a penguin in the back seat. She asks the driver, “Where are you going with that penguin?”

The man answers, “I’m taking it to the zoo.”

The officer agrees that that is the best place for a penguin and lets them go.

One week later, the same man is stopped by the same police officer for speeding again. The officer notices the penguin in the back of the car again and says, “You told me last time that you were taking that penguin to the zoo.”

The man answers, “Yes, I did take it to the zoo last week. Today we are going to the movies.”

### RESOURCE FOR JOKES

*The Internet TESL Journal*. “Jokes in English for the ESL/EFL Classroom: A Project of the Internet TESL Journal.” <http://iteslj.org/c/jokes-long.html> (This site offers long jokes, short jokes, riddles, and other materials that can be used for teaching English.)

This activity was written by **Wendy Coulson**, a 2017–2018 English Language Fellow in Medellín, Colombia, who has served as an English Language Specialist in Jordan and Tunisia with Libyan teacher trainers. She is an education consultant who designs education programs for NGO development projects and creates EFL curriculum and teacher-training courses, specializing in teaching young learners, community-based education, and limited-resource classrooms.

## Q & A Search

This puzzle is similar to a word search, but you will look for questions and answers instead of words. Below is a guide to six questions and answers, with some words filled in. Blanks show the number of letters in the remaining words. The questions and answers appear in the grid at the bottom of the page—reading forward, backward, up, or down. Work back and forth, filling in the blanks and circling the questions and answers in the grid. Note that apostrophes are included in the guide but not in the grid.

### GUIDE

1. Q: \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_?

A: \_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ O'CLOCK.

2. Q: \_\_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_?

A: \_\_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ SISTER.

3. Q: \_\_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_?

A: \_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ NOON.

4. Q: \_\_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_?

A: \_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_ HEAD.

5. Q: \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_?

A: \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_'\_\_ FULL.

6. Q: \_\_\_\_\_'\_\_ \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_? \_\_\_\_\_?

A: \_\_ \_\_\_\_\_'\_\_ KNOW.

### GRID

W	T	I	S	I	E	M	I	T	T	A	H	W	A
H	O	W	I	D	O	N	T	K	N	O	W	H	R
A	T	H	M	E	X	I	S	A	Y	W	H	E	E
T	A	O	K	A	J	F	O	R	U	M	E	N	T
S	H	S	W	S	A	U	N	H	E	N	E	S	S
T	Y	T	H	E	B	M	Y	C	L	O	R	O	I
H	M	H	E	G	O	N	O	I	L	O	E	U	S
E	S	A	R	E	Y	O	U	H	U	N	G	R	Y
A	E	T	E	T	H	E	R	W	F	T	I	T	M
N	R	G	S	Y	W	O	H	O	M	A	T	E	S
S	E	I	M	U	T	H	E	N	I	S	I	S	E
W	H	R	N	O	G	N	A	T	O	T	R	T	H
E	W	L	M	I	J	I	D	O	N	I	E	H	S
R	K	C	O	L	C	O	O	W	T	S	T	I	I

