

TOP 10 ESL Speaking Activities

For even more ESL games and activities, check out: [39 No-Prep/Low-Prep ESL Speaking Activities: For Teenagers and Adults](#) on Amazon.

1. Describing Something Guessing Game

Skills: Speaking/listening/reading

Time: 5-10 minutes

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Materials: Handout or PowerPoint with approximately 20 names

This is a simple warm-up activity that you can use to generate some interest in a topic for intermediate or advanced students. For beginners, it's best to play after you've taught them the necessary language to make the sentences. Make up a handout or PowerPoint with pictures or names of famous people (around 20 is good). Give some hints, such as, "He's American," "He's black," "He's a sport player," or "He plays golf." By this time the students will have guessed Tiger Woods. You then cross Tiger Woods off their list or delete it from the PowerPoint. Turn it over to the students and they will take turns describing the people to each other.

You can play in pairs, small groups or the whole class. This activity works for almost any topic (animals/food/clothes, etc) and is good for kids or adults.

Here is a Korea-centric version of this game that I used in my own classes a couple of years ago:

[Famous People Guessing Game.](#)

Teaching Tips: I emphasize that students should speak in full sentences when they are giving hints to their partners. Simply saying things like, "Man, black, golf" is really not useful for helping students improve their English skills beyond the most basic beginners and even then, it's questionable. As a general rule, the more that you can get your students speaking in full sentences, the better of they'll be in terms of language learning. It's far easier to let your students just say one or two words, but they're not actually pushing themselves to incorporate grammar constructions into their speech in a

meaningful way.

You can put in a few fun pictures to make it more interesting. For example, I'll always include a picture of myself in a situation where it might not look like me because I had a different hairstyle or was wearing glasses. Or, I'll put in a picture of my twin sister (I really do have a twin)! You can also add a picture of a student in the class or another teacher at your school that the students would know.

Procedure:

1. Prepare pictures of famous people on a handout or on PowerPoint.
2. Do one example with the students so they get an idea of how to play.
3. Put the students into partners or small groups. The first student chooses someone secretly and describes him/her to his/her partner, who must guess.
4. The students switch roles and continue until the time is up.

2.The “Expert” Conversation Activity

Skills: Speaking/listening

Time: 20-30 minutes

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Materials: Nothing

The students write down five things that they're an expert in. Once they've written their lists, they circle the three that they think will be most interesting to the other students in the class. Next, divide them up into groups of two and give them about 5-6 minutes to ask some questions to their partner about things they are experts in. Keep changing partners for as long as you want the activity to last, but more than 3-4 times gets kind of boring.

Teaching Tips: if possible, try to get students to go with someone that they don't know. This is

particularly helpful for the students who don't know anybody else in the class, or don't have a friend. Having a five minute conversation with someone makes you feel like you actually know someone and these students won't be so alone in future classes. I do this by asking students to choose someone to go with that they don't know their name.

Teachers don't always need to participate in activities, so if there is an even number of students in your class, just observe but you don't need to join in. Remember that the goal of our classes should be for students to practice speaking English, not us.

Emphasize that students should try to choose topics of general interest. In my own example, I try to choose two things that obviously most other people aren't interested in so students get an idea of what I mean.

Procedure:

1. Talk about “expert” with your students. Tell them five things that you're an expert in.
2. Students make their own list.
3. Choose the three things that you think will be most interesting to the others in the class. Tell students to do the same.
4. Students find a partner and talk together for 5-6 minutes about the chosen topics.
5. Switch partners and continue.

3.Partner Conversation Starters

Skills: Writing/Speaking

Time: 15-30 Minutes

Level: Beginner to Intermediate

Materials: Nothing

Give the students a conversation starter to get them going. For example, if you're talking about feelings in class that day, you can use:

A. Hey _____, how are you doing? B. I'm great, how are you? A. I'm _____ (sad, embarrassed, angry, bored, etc). B. Oh? What's wrong? A. _____ B. _____ A. _____ , B. _____,

Give the students about 10 minutes to write the conversation with their partner. You can adjust the number of lines as well as the amount of preparation time to suit the ability level of your class. Then, the students memorize their conversation, and recite it in front of their classmates. I usually emphasize that they are not to just read their paper, but that they must memorize it and that it's even better if they can act it out convincingly and/or add some humor.

4. Ball Toss

Skills: Reading/speaking/listening

Time: 5-15 minutes

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Materials: Lightweight ball (such as a beach ball) with questions written on it

This is a game with many variations. One I have used with great success is writing questions around a beach ball. I use a whiteboard marker, but let it dry thoroughly before class, so it doesn't smudge but it can be washed clean and reused with different questions later. Students gently toss the ball to one another and read aloud and answer the question under their right thumb. A more complex variation is: Student A reads/asks the question, tosses the ball to Student B, who answers that question, then asks the question under their right thumb, and tosses the ball to Student C, who answers Student B's question... In any case, before you begin, demonstrate tossing gently and let them know the penalty for aggressive throwing.

If it's a "getting to know you" activity, use questions to elicit name, age, and basic information.

Otherwise, it can be used to practice likes/dislikes, wh-questions, etc. It is quite a versatile activity

and can be used with just about anything that you're studying.

No prep/No materials variation: crumple up a piece of paper to use as a ball. Ask a question and toss the ball to a student. That student must answer and ask a question (the same question for true beginners or related question, if higher level), then toss the “ball” to the next student. If you want the students to ask different questions, you should give them a topic (daily routine, hobbies, etc.) or grammar pattern to use.

If you want to make sure all students have equal turns, have students sit down after catching the ball. If you have more than 10-12 students in your class, you may want to divide them into groups, each with their own ball, so students aren't waiting long periods between turns. This will also increase student talking time.

At the end, you may want to ask students questions about other students' answers. Let students know before they begin that they need to listen closely to each other's answers. This will make them more likely to pay attention between their own turns and, of course, provide additional listening practice.

5. ESL Speaking Bingo

Skills: Speaking/listening/writing

Time: 15-30 minutes

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Materials: Blank “Bingo” grids, or blank paper.

This is a very fun activity that kids as well as university students seem to love. Have a list of about 40-50 vocab words that you've been studying. If you use less, the game will be over very quickly. Give the students a pre-made Bingo Grid, or have them draw a 5x5 grid. Then the students fill in the grid randomly from the list of words on the board or PowerPoint. Then, choose someone to go first (rocks, scissor, paper/ draw numbers out of a hat, etc). The first student describes a word, but doesn't actually say the word. The next person describes another word. And on it goes, just like a regular bingo game, but the students are speaking the whole time. You can do variations, such as “1 line,” “2 lines,” “X-Bingo” and “Blackout.” This works best in smaller classes of ten or less.

In bigger classes, you can describe the words but it becomes solely a listening/writing exercise instead of a speaking one.

Teaching Tips: this game requires absolutely no prep-time if you are given a class at the last minute and need something to fill the time. Simply ask the students what they've been studying the past few days or weeks and if they say, "Animals," then ask them to tell you all the animals they know and write them on the board and that will form the list they have to choose from as they prepare their boards.

Get the students to prepare their own Bingo boards. It will save you a lot of time and also give the students a chance to practice their spelling and handwriting, which is helpfully particularly if they are lower level students.

Ask the students to use a highlighter or just an "x" over the words instead of scribbling it out entirely with their pens. This way, you are able to check their answers in case of a bingo.

Procedure:

1. Prepare blank bingo grids beforehand (or students can draw their own on paper), as well as a list of vocab words (PowerPoint works well).
2. Students fill in the bingo grid with their chosen words.
3. The first student chooses a word and describes it, using hints but not the word itself.
4. Students cross off that word. The next student describes a word and so on it goes.
5. The first student to get one line is the winner. The next winner is two lines, then "X," then "blackout." My rule is that you can't win more than one round.

6. What Am I?

Skills: Speaking/Listening/Reading

Time: 10-15 Minutes

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Materials: tape/pins and Vocab words on paper

Write a bunch of animals (or whatever vocab you want) on slips of paper. Then tape or pin one to each student's back so that they can't see what it is. They have to go around the class asking questions to other students to find out what they are. For example, "Do I have 4 legs?" After 1 question, they can make a guess and the other student will answer "yes" or "no." They can only ask each student one question, so they will eventually talk to everyone in the class. Have some extras if a student uncovers their animal very quickly.

7. 2 Truths and a Lie

Skills: Writing/listening/speaking

Time: 10 minutes-1 hour

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Materials: Nothing

Play in groups of 4-6 in a bigger class, or everyone together in a small class. It's a good activity to use "always, usually, sometimes, never" or "can, can't" or "I've...." Students write 3 sentences, one of which is false. They read their sentences and the other students guess the false one. Higher level classes can ask 3 questions or have a set amount of time to ask question (3-5 minutes) to determine the false one. A correct guess gets 1 point. Each student gets a turn to play.

8. Vocab Flip Chart

Skills: Speaking/listening

Time: 20 minutes

Level: Beginner to Advanced

Materials : Flip-chart or flashcard

The “captain” sits in a chair at the front of the class facing her team. The teacher stands behind the captain with vocab words on a flip-chart or a stack of flashcards. If you use flashcards, make sure they are big enough for everyone to be able to see them, even at the back of the class. The team has to give hints in English to the captain until she can guess the word. At that point, the team moves on to the next word. Each round is three minutes and you can play 3-4 rounds with different captains. I give each group one “pass” per round in case there is a word that the captain really doesn't know.

Teaching Tips: make sure you emphasize that this game requires speaking only English. It is simply too easy for students to say the word in the first language and then the captain to say it in English and then it's not a useful speaking activity. I warn students at the beginning of the game that if I hear a word in the first language, that round will immediately finish, even if they are only 5 seconds into it.

Also, be sure to tell your students that they cannot use action, but must only give hints by speaking. The same immediate finish rules applies for this as well.

One of the cons of this game is that the other team is sitting idly waiting while the other team is going. A way to alleviate this problem is by keeping the rounds very short so that waiting time is reduced. You can also mention that any word that a team has “passed” on could come back into play so it's good to pay attention. You could also elicit the other team's help to watch for any infractions such as making actions or not speaking in English.

Procedure:

1. Prepare a large flip-chart of flashcards with your target vocabulary. I often use an old notebook.
2. Put the students into teams of 4-8 students. They choose their captain for the first round.
3. The first team sends their captain to the front of the class who sits in a chair facing their team, while the teacher stands behind them with the flashcards. Give the team 2-3 minutes to describe as many words as possible, using only English to the captain who must guess them.
4. Continue to play until all teams have played an equal number of rounds, with different captains for

each round.

5. The team with the most points at the end of all the rounds is the winner.

9. Problem/Advice

Skills: Reading/Writing/Speaking

Time: 15 minutes

Level: Intermediate to Advanced

Materials: Nothing

This is an excellent activity for studying should/shouldn't, better/better not. Write down a problem (For example: a high-school student studying for the university entrance exam who is exhausted and can't sleep at night). Have the students write down some advice in groups of 2-4. The most helpful/clear advice gets a prize. If you want to expand on this activity, you can get them to make a video giving their advice, either alone or with a partner. Or, you could have students go in teams and think of both the problems (real or fake!) and the advice.

10. The Secret Person

Skills: Writing/speaking/listening

Time: 30 minutes

Level: Intermediate to advanced

Materials: Nothing

This is the perfect activity for studying questions in the past tense. Have students think of 2 dead people and write down when he was born/ where he was from/why he was famous/how did he die/one more interesting thing. Then, collect the papers and play a secret person game. You can go around the class, from group to group giving one hint at a time. After each hint, the team gets a guess. If incorrect, give the next hint to the next team.