ESL Developmental Continuum P—10

Teaching strategy — Reaching a consensus: Barrier games

Focuses on

Speaking Listening Reading Writing

Most useful for students at stages

A1 A2 BL B1 B2 **B3** SL S1 S2 **S3 S4**

Purpose of this activity

This activity is suitable for students at the more advanced levels — above B2 or S2, as students need to have some ability to argue and discuss in English, as well as higher order conceptual development and knowledge of the world, in order to complete the activity.

How this helps ESL students in particular

By conducting the activity in pairs and small groups, this takes the pressure off students from having to 'perform' in front of the whole class. Whole class discussions can fail with ESL students, as they can be reluctant to give a personal opinion in front of the whole class — when the groups report back after this activity it is a group position which is presented.

The fact of having to make choices gives the students a clear purpose for their discussion and an outcome that is clear for them to aim for.

Built into the activity is the need to argue and discuss and use expressions like 'I believe', 'in my opinion', 'yes, but' and so forth, which are indicators of progress at the higher levels of the secondary scales.

Procedure

Students are initially given either a situation or a question. For example, they could be asked to come up with a list of five qualities that make a good teacher, or the five (or another number) things you need in order to have a good birthday party, etc. Examples include:

- **Desert island**

  One popular version of the task is to give students a scenario where they are shipwrecked on a desert island and only have time to retrieve 10 items from their rapidly shrinking ship. Students have to choose from a list of items.

- **Balloon**

  Another version has students given a list of important people who are in a balloon. The balloon will crash land unless one of these people is ejected from the balloon. Students need to reach consensus on whether, for example, Marie Curie or Claude Monet should be ejected.

- **President of the World**

Another example is the 'President of the World' task where students are either given a list of candidates for this position, or come up with a short list themselves, and need to decide on who should have the position.

In all these above scenarios, students initially will come up with their own individual list or decision, usually in writing. Then they join with a partner to come up with an agreed list, then join another pair and negotiate to consensus for the whole group of four. This can be continued to bigger groups, but the time involved is usually not warranted, and boredom can set in if students are asked to repeat the process too many times.

Acknowledgments/reference

For examples of some suitable scenarios for this activity, see:

Klippel, F. (1984). *Keep talking: Communicative fluency activities for language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rooks, G. (1988). *The non-stop discussion workbook: Problems for intermediate and advanced students of English.* 2nd edition. Boston: Heinle & Heinle.