TESOL Connections
Keeping English language professionals connected

New Year, New Ways to Talk to Strangers
by Alice Llanos and Amy Tate

The new year is a chance for fresh starts—and a time for our students to resolve to speak more English. We can help them with this goal by creating activities that get them out of the classroom and into the real world, speaking with fluent English speakers. In the activities we share here, students conduct short interviews on prepared topics with someone outside of their circle of family and friends—often, a complete stranger.

Talking to strangers is scary, but real life requires it. In fact, research shows that this kind of contact actually boosts linguistic self-confidence (Cheng & Dornyei, 2007; Hummel, 2013). This confidence is the strongest predictor of adaptation to a new culture, even stronger than second language proficiency and motivation (Yu & Shen, 2012). However, many learners report that these second language interactions are difficult to initiate (Wright & Schartner, 2013). Students with strong English skills can still lack confidence, and thus, do not engage in the interactions that, paradoxically, will help them improve their confidence, and ultimately, as Cheng and Dornyei (2007) noted, improve their second language achievement.

These interview activities create interactions for our students. Although this may seem intimidating, well-scaffolded classwork prepares them for the task. Four principles guide the interview activities, regardless of the topic or theme. We highlight each principle and describe an activity that exemplifies each one. Every activity begins by learning about the given topic through readings, listening passages, vocabulary building, and in-class discussions. This is essential to give students the foundation for the topic.

Principle 1: Make the Interview Experience Less Intimidating

Whenever we announce an interview activity in class—regardless of the level of the students—we hear some inevitable groans and even expressions of panic and fear. And with good reason; not many people enjoy approaching strangers, let alone in a second language.

The key is to provide lots of practice in class before sending students out for interviews. The simplest (and often best) interview activities happen after a class discussion on a topic and practice with interview language and etiquette.

Example Activity: Names Interview

After completing a unit on names, students in a low-intermediate reading class interview people on campus about their own names. The students have already read articles about how names are chosen in different cultures and about famous people who changed their names. They studied the related vocabulary and had class discussions about their own names and cultural practices. On the day of the interview activity, students use a form to interview their classmates about the origins of their names (see Appendix A). This gives them a chance to practice asking their interview questions in a controlled environment and with a person with whom they feel at ease.

Apart from practicing the content of the interview, we also review and role-play helpful phrases to start the conversations. ("Excuse me, do you have a minute?" "Could you help me with a class project?") Students practice what to do if rejected ("Thanks for your time!") and how to show appreciation at the end.

Then, it is time for students to leave the comfort of their classroom and go out on campus and speak to strangers. They go out with a partner and use the same form for interviewing fluent English speakers on campus. Pairing up allows bolder students to support shyer ones and lets one student jump in if the other forgets a question. Because they have a form to complete, one can write while the other interviews. However, both students need to take turns talking. In this activity, we ask them to interview four people total, so each student should take the lead on two of the interviews. Afterward, they return to class and we tally the results on the board. Students generally return energized by the positive interactions they have had.

Principle 2: Find Willing Interviewees

In the previous activity, students are enrolled in a program on a community college campus, so there are many fluent English speakers available to interview. If your English program is similarly situated, then it should be relatively easy for students to find people to interview. If not, a little creativity will help you locate appropriate places in your community for students to find interviewees.

Example Activity: Leadership Interview

An advanced oral communication class interviews members of campus organizations about leadership. Again, this activity happens after a unit on the interview topic: leadership. Our campus has an activity fair at the beginning of each semester where clubs share information and recruit members. Students learn how to get involved on campus (a fantastic way to practice English!) but also complete a chart focused on the theme of leadership (see Appendix B). The club members are the perfect interviewees—they are sitting there, waiting for someone to talk to them, and they often have opinions about leadership.

Look for these types of fairs on and off campus. Volunteer fairs, job fairs, health fairs…local public schools and community centers often have events with tables set up with nice people

willing to talk about their services. Other possibilities include farmers markets or arts and crafts fairs.

In addition to structured events, we sometimes ask our students to approach strangers in public places. They should always look for groups of friends who are relaxing and look like they have time for an interview. They shouldn't interrupt someone seriously studying or a parent dealing with a crying child.

Finally, you may want to recruit interviewees from a community group, a retirement center, or a campus organization. There are people who want to meet English learners, and they would be happy to come to your class. You just have to ask!

Principle 3: Give a Clear Purpose for the Task

We all work better (and harder) when we know the reason we've been asked to do something. For an activity as nerve-wracking as an interview, a clear purpose assures students that the interview will be worthwhile.

> **Example Activity: Third Place Interview**
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> In this activity, intermediate students choose a place in their city that they would like to explore and determine if it fits the criteria of a third place. "Third Place" is a concept created by sociologist Ray Oldenburg and explained in his book *The Great Good Place* (1989). It comes from the idea that your first place is your home, and your second place is your work or school. Your third place is a necessary place in society where you can relax, meet with friends, and make new friends.
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> In preparation for their interviews, students create and practice their questions in class with a partner, and then visit their chosen place, interview patrons, and note their own observations, trying to decide if this place could indeed be a "third place." They ask questions like "How frequently do you come here?" and "Why do you choose to spend time here?" Upon returning to school, they engage in a debriefing session in which they share their interview experience with their classmates. Later at home, they incorporate their interview information and observations into a presentation about their third place. In this presentation, they explain whether their place fits the criteria of a third place. When the presentations are concluded, the class votes on the best third place, and we visit it together.

Students know from the beginning that they will be using the interviews as the basis for their presentation. They have a clear purpose for conducting their interview, and they can't do their presentation without collecting that information.

Students often report that when they tell an interviewee, "I have to do this for a class," they get a positive response. So, just as knowing the purpose motivates our students, it also motivates the people they approach to interview.

Principle 4: Add a Language Focus

Many times, we want our students to practice a particular grammar structure or set of vocabulary. We may choose to add a language focus to an interview activity to provide this opportunity.

> **Example Activity: English Learner Interview**
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> After a grammar lesson on embedded questions and reported speech, advanced students interview a nonnative English speaker who learned English as a teenager or adult and who now uses English daily. They write questions that ask about the interviewee's experience learning and using English, obstacles they may have encountered and overcome when using English, and suggestions or techniques for mastering the language.
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> In class, students share their questions with each other and make corrections. Students also work to embed the questions for politeness. ("May I ask when you finally started to feel confident using English?") Later, students conduct their interviews and record them. At home, they listen to the recording and prepare a presentation in which they use reported speech to share the highlights from their interview.

By adding a language focus, we give our students an opportunity to practice some target language in a real-life setting.

Again and again, we have seen students leave our classroom nervous about the prospect of interviewing a stranger and return with a confidence boost and stories to share. These small interactions can lead to big gains in helping them reach their language goals. By following these four guiding principles to create interview activities, teachers can help students reach their new year's resolution to speak more English.

Note: This article is based on a presentation, "Do Talk to Strangers," given by Alice and Amy at the 2019 TESOL International Convention in Atlanta, Georgia, USA.

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Alice Llanos *began her teaching career in Tokyo, Japan and now resides in Houston, Texas where she has been teaching English as a second language in the Intensive English Program at Rice University since 2006. She also develops and teaches classes for the university’s online English language program and frequently presents at conferences where she enjoys talking to strangers.*

Amy Tate *teaches ESOL at Lonestar College – Montgomery, in a suburb of Houston, Texas. She received her MATESOL from the New School. In her free time, Amy enjoys international travel and was thrilled to be interviewed by English language students while waiting in a plaza in Oaxaca, Mexico.*

First Name of Interviewee	Who gave the name to you?	Why did they choose it?	Do you like it? Why/why not?

Leadership Interviews

First name of interviewee	Where you met	Qualities of a good leader	Qualities of a bad leader	Who is a great leader? Why?