

Learners have to choose who they want to accompany them for their year in a space station hovering above the earth.

In the USA in the 19th century, there was a custom where women, looking for a husband, would invite eligible young bachelors on 1st January for fifteen-minute-maximum visits. Was that the origin of speed dating in which couples try and see if there might be any attraction and compatibility between them in structured three-minute interviews?

ELT classrooms should not be dating environments (!), though Laura Hayward uses an enjoyable activity of this kind on the video to accompany Harmer (2007), but the short, structured interview is a naturally effective communicative activity at almost any level and age.

- 1 Tell learners that they are going to spend a year in a space station 400 kilometres above the earth. They will take one person with them. They have to choose who that is.
- 2 Discuss ideal qualities for a companion in such circumstances. What kind of character should they have? What would make them easy to live with and reliable in the event of trouble? What should they be good at? The language of the questions will obviously depend on the level of the group. Prompt learners with suggestions to try and broaden the discussion.
- 3 Now ask learners to write a maximum of four questions (that's all there will be time for) to help them work out who their ideal space station companion is. This is not a romantic speed dating activity – it's more practical than that! They do this individually. While they are working on their questions, go round the class helping learners with language suggestions.
- 4 Tell learners they are about to start the procedure and that they will have a maximum of two minutes to interview each 'candidate'.

- 5 Learners now form 'fluency circles' (Bohike, 2013) where half the class stand in an inner circle facing outwards and the other half form an outer circle facing inwards. The outer circle learners must interview the inner circle learners opposite them. They should have notebooks with them to record their thoughts.
- 6 The interviews start. After two minutes (or three, if you think that is necessary) ask the outer circle learners to move one person to the left. Now they interview the new learners in front of them.
- 7 When the circle has been completed, it is now the inner circle's task to interview the people opposite *them*. As before, they have two (or three) minutes for each interview.
- 8 When the activity is over, have a discussion with the class. Who would they choose and why? Which of their questions were the most effective? How useful have they found the activity, etc? This is the moment where you can clear up any language issues that may have arisen.

Why it works for me

Learners work together, building inter-group cohesion. They have to make a choice and this demands deep processing. There is purposeful repetition, obviously. The activity is dynamic and fast-moving.

Alternatives

Some teachers do actually role play a speed dating session (with no need for a space station!), but it has to be done in an appropriately light-hearted way (see also 2 and 48).

Online/virtual variations

It would be difficult to create fluency circles online. However, we can create an interview panel for a space station team. Groups (the whole group, or groups in breakout rooms) can design their questions and then interview members of the other groups one by one (with everyone looking on). With smaller classes we wouldn't need to form breakout groups, of course.

Bohike, D. (2013). 'Fluency-oriented second language teaching' in Celce-Murcia, M., Brinton, D. M. and Snow, M. A. (Eds). *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language: Fourth Edition*. Heinle Cengage Learning.

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