

Students write detailed profiles of the characters they are going to play, and then the story is built up through a series of improvisations and scripted. Work is done on pronunciation as well as using drama techniques to improve performance. After the final performance one student commented, 'I've improved my English, had fun, and I've got to know my friends much better – what more can I ask of a course?'

### **Discussions and debates**

Many teachers would agree that the best discussions in class are those that arise spontaneously, either because of something personal that a learner reports or because a topic or a text in the coursebook triggers some debate. Here, for example, a teacher describes how one such discussion erupted in a class of Catalan teenagers:

I was trying to get attention at the beginning of the class but two of the girls were so deeply engrossed in a conversation in Catalan that it was proving even more difficult than usual. Finally, I said to these two girls that if their conversation was really that interesting they should tell the rest of the students, in English, what they were talking about. One of the girls proceeded to tell the class about a girl at her school who was wreaking havoc by telling lies about people and generally being very destructive. The rest of the students listened with good attention, then asked questions, made suggestions, and the conversation developed for the next twenty minutes or so.

In this case, the teacher knew how to take advantage of the students' concerns, and turn this into a discussion activity in English. In the absence of such opportunities, however, it is useful to have a store of techniques for setting up discussions in a more formal way. Here are some generic discussion formats.



**Discussion cards** – the teacher prepares in advance sets of cards (one for each group) on which are written statements relating to a pre-selected topic. In their groups, one student takes the first card, reads it aloud, and they then discuss it for as long as they need, before taking the next card, and so on. If a particular statement doesn't interest them, they can move on to the next one. The object is not necessarily to discuss all the statements: the teacher should decide at what point to end the activity. Groups who have finished early can prepare a summary of the main points that have come up. These summaries can be used to open up the discussion to the whole class. The topic may, for example, be fashion, and the statements to discuss might include the following:

Fashion is universal.  
Fashion is an art form.  
People should not be judged by what they wear.  
Fashion is simply a way of making people spend money.  
Fashion celebrates diversity.  
The fashion industry is unethical.  
etc.

Alternatively, the discussion points could be phrased as questions, with a view to eliciting a more personal response, such as:

How important is the label on an item of clothing?  
 How often do you shop for clothes?  
 Would you wear – or have you worn – second-hand clothes?  
 How would you describe your style of dress?  
 etc.

There is, of course, no reason why the learners shouldn't be able to prepare the cards themselves, especially they are about a topic they have experience in or have been reading about. Groups then prepare a set of cards and exchange them with other groups.



**Warm-up discussions** – when introducing a new topic or preparing learners to read or listen to a text, it is common to set a few questions for pair or group discussion, followed by a report back to the whole class. These discussion questions may target general knowledge about the topic (in which case they could be set as a homework research task) or some personalized response to the topic. Here, for example, is a warm-up discussion task that introduces a coursebook unit on sport:

## On the ball

### Speaking

Discuss these questions.

- 1 Which is your favourite sport? Why do you like it?
- 2 Do you play it, watch it or both?
- 3 What sports do you dislike? Why?
- 4 Which sports do you associate more with men or women? Why?



**Balloon debate** – this popular format is based on the idea that a hot-air balloon with its cargo of passengers is dangerously overloaded and at least one of the passengers has to be jettisoned. The group members, representing famous people in history, famous living people, or people in different professions, put their case as to why they should be saved and why someone else should be sacrificed. This works best if students have had time to prepare their case, and this can be done in pairs. For example, if there are enough students to form two 'balloons', matched pairs from each balloon first work together, before re-forming in order to stage the debate.



**Pyramid (or Consensus) debate** – the principle of this format is that at first individuals work in pairs to achieve consensus on an issue, and then these pairs try to convince other pairs, before forming groups of four, and so on, until the whole class comes to an agreement. For example, the teacher might set the class the task of devising some 'class rules' with regard to such things as classroom etiquette, discipline,

and marking a written test of grammar is relatively easy and time-efficient. A test of speaking, on the other hand, is not. If all the students of a class have to be interviewed individually, the disruption caused, and the time taken, may seem to outweigh the benefits. Moreover, different testers may have very different criteria for judging speaking, differences that are less acute when it comes to judging writing or grammar knowledge, for example.

All these difficulties aside, a language programme that prioritizes speaking but doesn't test it *through* speaking can't be said to be doing its job properly. To re-state a point made earlier: a test of grammar is *not* a test of speaking. The need to test speaking through speaking is particularly acute if learners are hoping to enter for a public examination which includes a speaking component, such as the Cambridge First Certificate in English (FCE) or the International English Language Testing Service (IELTS) examination. Furthermore, where teachers or students are reluctant to engage in much classroom speaking, the effect of an oral component in the final examination can be a powerful incentive to 'do more speaking' in class. This is known as the **washback effect** of testing, i.e. the oral nature of the test 'washes back' into the coursework that precedes it.

It therefore makes sense to incorporate oral testing procedures into language courses despite the difficulties. Since the activities designed to test speaking are generally the same as the kinds of activities designed to practise speaking, there need be no disruption to classroom practice. The challenge is more in deciding and applying satisfactory assessment criteria.

### Types of spoken tests

The most commonly used spoken test types are these:

- **Interviews** – these are relatively easy to set up, especially if there is a room apart from the classroom where learners can be interviewed. The class can be set some writing or reading task (or even the written component of the examination) while individuals are called out, one by one, for their interview. Such interviews are not without their problems, though. The rather formal nature of interviews (whether the interviewer is the learner's teacher or an outside examiner) means that the situation is hardly conducive to testing more informal, conversational speaking styles. Not surprisingly, students often underperform in interview-type conditions. It is also difficult to eliminate the effects of the interviewer – his or her questioning style, for example – on the interviewee's performance. Finally, if the interviewer is also the assessor, it may be difficult to maintain the flow of the talk while at the same time making objective judgments about the interviewee's speaking ability. Nevertheless, there are ways of circumventing some of these problems. A casual chat at the beginning can help put candidates at their ease. The use of pictures or a pre-selected topic as a focus for the interview can help, especially if candidates are given one or two minutes to prepare themselves in advance. If the questions are the same for each interview, the interviewer effect is at least the same for all candidates. And having a third party present to co-assess the candidate can help ensure a degree of objectivity.