

An Activity for Teaching ESL/EFL Students to Make Quick Replies

Gerard Counihan

[profesorSs \[at\] blabla.es](mailto:profesorSs[at]blabla.es)

A typically native utterance is the one that comes off the top of the head, without much thought given to it. This type of expression could well come under the heading of "small talk", and a common example is "Great weather, isn't it".

The idea of this activity is to get the students to reply as naturally as possible to a relatively empty comment or statement like above. Their reply will lack in formal correctness, because that is not the aim of the class. (Much native-native banter is said to be formally incorrect). Another very important factor to tell them is that their reply does not have to be a logical follow-up remark; they should say the first thing that comes into their heads. By saying the first thing that comes into their heads, they are actually behaving collaboratively with the initial speaker. To this end, the reply should also be quite short, although there are no hard and fast rules when people's personal interpretations are involved.

The Rejoinders & Replies Activity

Tell the students that they are with friends in, say, a cafeteria. It is a cloudy day outside and there is a lull in the conversation. Someone is reading a paper, another person could be day-dreaming, and another people-watching. Silence reigns, and then one of the group says something, which is not directed at anyone in particular, off the top of his head.

The teacher can utter the following remarks with the tone he sees fit. He can direct the utterance at the students one by one, or at the group of students, but all the students must then reply.

- Hey! It's the end of the month!
- Ouch! I've cut my finger on this page.
- Someone looking at a newspaper: You know guys, this town we live in really IS a beautiful place.
- Someone looking at a holiday photo of himself: Jeez, I look awful here.
- Someone who is broke: I'd have another coffee, only I don't have any money left.
- Someone looking at a newspaper: That was a terrible accident in X, wasn't it?
- Someone looking towards the street: It must be raining, I see an umbrella up outside.
- Someone whispering: See that man over at the counter, he's just put a cake into his pocket.
- Someone looking at a newspaper: Actors are lucky people, aren't they?
- Someone looking at the TV in the cafeteria: People watch too much TV.
- Someone watching a mother/father with young children: They shouldn't allow kids in here.
- Etc...

Notes:

- The teacher can say the spontaneous comments and then get the students to reply spontaneously.
- You can change the setting to, say, a meeting, a hospital, a school ...
- I found that students tended to take too long, and ended up constructing wonderful, logical, grammatical sentences (not to mention polite). For example, to "Ouch! I've cut my finger", I got: "You must go to hospital!" and "Cover it" (?)
- Fair enough, you can also opt to just practise simple, correct sentences, but what the activity wants to encourage is realistic, fast replies, which are elliptical in many cases like in native-native exchanges.
- You could even allow the students to give their long-pondered sentences, and then remind them that they are with friends, that interlocutors in real-life don't normally wait 20 seconds for a reply to a spontaneous remark. I actually did this, and found that people understood the point, accepted it and enjoyed thinking up more CASUAL replies
- After a while, I was getting the following:

- "It's the end of the month" Reply: "Yes, and we're getting older"
- " ... this town we live in is beautiful ..." Reply: "yeah, a shop window" (nice from the outside)
- Get them to be creative and to get themselves into an appropriate frame of mind. They must forget they are in a classroom.
- As a bonus, you may even be able to digress (let them know this, tell them it is a time-out) and actually debate a reply (for example, the one about the town being a shop window. Why is it?).

In summary, encourage:

- Imagination.
- Ellipsis.
- Spontaneity.
- Appropriate frame of mind. Get into context.
- Accuracy is not that important.

The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IV, No. 11, November 1998

<http://iteslj.org/>
