

# Designing Simple Interactive Tasks for Small Groups

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The selection and design of tasks to practise interactive ability which simulate real-life language use is important to any course that includes the aim of improving ability in spoken interaction. Just as providing interactive tasks can never be sufficient in itself to develop conversational ability, merely following a textbook is unlikely to stimulate small-group interaction. Specific tasks of the kind rarely found in textbooks need to be designed for this purpose. While there exists a considerable and valuable literature on group-work in the fields of co-operative learning, classroom interaction and task-based learning, this short paper has only a practical focus, providing a checklist for task designers based on experience and specific examples in the form of a set of easily replicable and adaptable worksheets.

## A Checklist for Task Designers

The following criteria are worth considering when designing tasks.

### 1. Simulating "Real" Conversation

Classroom tasks are simulations and can only approximate real-life communication, but real-life skills, such as adjusting to an interlocutor's contribution can be built in. Tasks designed to practise interactive ability should be an appropriate task for the students. They must be able to imagine themselves in the situation. When there is a reason for selecting an unrealistic task, the lack of realism could be emphasized. Using imagination beyond the students' experience is then deliberately forefronted.

### 2. Exchanging

An interactive task should require students to exchange information, opinions, attitudes, but not for its own sake. There should be a real purpose; each participant should need to find something out from the others in order to complete the task.

### 3. Checking Understanding

The task should require the participants to make sure they fully understand what the others tell them and to make themselves fully understood to the others. In this way, students will need to adjust to each other's contributions.

### 4. Improvising

The task should require both predictable and unpredictable communication. Real conversation always involves unpredictability so an ability to improvise needs to be practised. For example, an attempt to come to an agreement is unpredictable. There is no requirement to actually reach an agreement, so the participants may develop the conversation freely. On the other hand, they must exchange the information for an agreement to be possible and cannot easily avoid asking questions.

### 5. Equal Opportunity

Where possible, the task should allow participants (and definitely exam candidates) an equal opportunity to structure the conversation. Ideally, they should have equal access to important features of turn-taking such as self-selection and nomination and should be able to initiate, negotiate and follow up other participants' contributions. Care must therefore be taken not to devise *assessment* tasks that require or encourage the adoption of unequal roles in conversation (unless, of course, it is specifically designed to practise unequal social roles, such as boss-employee, etc).

## **6. Mixed-Ability**

For mixed-ability courses, tasks should favour the production of contributions of all kinds. They should allow both weak and strong participants to extend themselves to their full ability. For strong participants, making themselves understood to students with less linguistic ability is a useful skill in itself. Opportunity and time must be available for candidates to hold the floor and produce longer contributions where appropriate, but they should also have the opportunity to use short conversational phrases reacting to the contributions of other speakers. Less able students should still be able to accomplish at least the first part of the task at their own level.

## **7. Models**

Models of performance can be provided by making recordings of tasks using competent speakers of the language (not necessarily native speakers). These can be used for listening activities that focus on skills such as turn-taking or pronunciation, and language that students themselves can use.

## **8. Time Constraints**

Reasonable time constraints should be imposed. A group of three students would normally require about 15-20 minutes to do the sample task below, although up to one hour of class time may be needed overall, taking preparation and follow-up activities into account.

## **9. Outcomes**

Interactive activities are still pedagogical tasks and, as such, should have outcomes or results. Tasks for classroom instruction should have the potential for either a performance or a "report-back" phase, during which students could write a report or (a) group spokesperson(s) could report back to the class. This provides the opportunity for recycling language used in the task and for remedial work on language problems that arise during the task. At this stage, the teacher may wish to engage in techniques for correcting language and might want to correct even the smallest errors in pronunciation, lexis or grammar. This counteracts the potentially negative effects of free communication, such as pigeonization, "local speak", such as "katakana English" in Japan, etc.

## **10. Language Practice**

The tasks will normally have some predictable features of language. Vocabulary on the topic has probably been taught using a textbook/worksheet, probably in a reading and/or listening activity. Students can be given intensive practice in language functions such as giving advice, expressing opinions, asking different kinds of questions. Interactive tasks provide practice, but are unlikely to lead to long-term learning if taught in isolation. They are integrated into courses involving all language skills. They support and are supported by exercises that focus on form or literacy skills.

## **11. Simple and Re-Usable**

Teachers are busy people. As far as possible, tasks should be designed so that they are simple and self-explanatory. They should be modifiable (on a word-processor) and re-used, possibly even with the same class for revision or assessment. While they may be simple, it is useful to build in a feature to help the teacher discover how well an independent task has been done at the report back stage. In the sample task below, for example, the accommodation is sometimes free. A full discussion would inevitably involve discussion about why. (Some work is expected in return.) A group that does not discuss this point has not really fully exchanged information.

## **12. Student Input**

After using the teacher-written sheets students should have the opportunity to make their own sheets for a future activity on the same topic. Task repetition is an important feature of a learning cycle and student input improves motivation.

## **13. Assessment**

Rating scales are an appropriate means of assessing interactive performance and helping students to become aware of their own ability, in order to set aims for future performances. Activities that are not assessed run the risk of being given low priority by students.

## A Sample Task "A Happy Person"

The following materials set up a series of activities, leading to a free conversation stage. The same basic table is used throughout.

### Task Preparation

#### Listening. (Optional)

1. The teacher talks about a Happy Person s/he knows well while students make notes in the following table. It is also possible to ask colleagues to record a monologue using the same categories to describe a real or imaginary "Happy Person".

### A Happy Person

Listen to the teacher describing a real or imaginary HAPPY person. Make notes in the table below.

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Age</b>	
<b>Job</b>	
<b>Accommodation</b>	
<b>Family</b>	
<b>Hobbies</b>	
<b>Opinion</b>	

2. Two teachers record a conversation talking about different people. They exchange information by asking and answering questions about the categories in the left hand column of the table, discuss the information briefly, and then try to decide which person is happiest. Students make notes in the table. It is also useful to design activities which require students to listen and identify questions asked by the speakers.

Listen to Roger and Darren talking about two "happy" people and make notes in the table.

	<b>Roger</b>	<b>Darren</b>
<b>Name</b>		
<b>Age</b>		
<b>Accommodation</b>		
<b>Family</b>		
<b>Hobbies</b>		
<b>Opinion</b>		

Which one do they decide is the happiest and why? Do you agree?

### Language Practice

Questions of various kinds are needed for the speaking activity. This could include standard questions such as "How old is Pierre?",

short conversational questions such as "What about Pierre?" once age has been established as the topic, or indirect questions such as "Do you know how old Pierre is?" Different question forms have already been demonstrated in the listening activities, but may be targeted for intensive preparation before the pair and group conversation stage.

### Question Practice. A Happy Person

Complete the following questions and then write another possible question in each box:

<b>Name</b>	What
<b>Age</b>	How
<b>Accommodation</b>	What kind of
<b>Family</b>	What can you tell me
<b>Hobbies</b>	What
<b>Opinions</b>	Does

Possible key

<b>Name</b>	What's the name of your "happy person"?
<b>Age</b>	How old is s/he? Do you know how old s/he is?
<b>Accommodation</b>	What kind of accommodation does s/he live in? Can you describe their home?
<b>Family</b>	What can you tell me about his/her family? Does s/he have a large family?
<b>Hobbies</b>	What does s/he do in her/his free time? What about his/her hobbies?
<b>Opinions</b>	Does s/he have anything interesting to say about "happiness"? What does s/he think leads to a happy life?

### Setting up the Group Speaking Task in Stages

After the listening and language exercises have been completed, the students should have a repertoire of questions available to them for exchanging information on the topics they will need. The following steps are intended to bring about a smooth transition into an independent small-group conversation between three or four students.

1. Divide the class into pairs and give half the pairs the student A and student B sheets. Give the other half the student C and student D sheets. In this way students can first work in pairs and then two adjacent pairs can form a small group.
2. Demonstrate the pair task with an able student, by asking a question. Demonstrate follow-up questions such as "Could you repeat/spell that please?" , "Does he enjoy his job all the time?" and reaction phrases such as "Flying small planes! That sounds really enjoyable."
3. Students exchange information and opinions in independent pairwork.
4. The teacher demonstrates a group conversation with two students.
5. Students work independently in groups.
6. Some groups report to the class explaining which person they think is the happiest and why.

### A Happy Person

Each student in your group has information about a different person.

1. You have information about one person. Add any other information you need from your own imagination.
2. Find out about the other two people.
3. Try to agree about who is the happiest.

### Student A

Name	Pierre
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Age	45
Job	Computer software designer in Central Paris - very well-paid
Accommodation	Large house in the suburbs 1 hour from central Paris by train
Family	Married with 3 young children Wife works full-time
Hobbies	Horse riding Flying small planes
Opinion	"I need a safe and steady job to be happy and to support a family."

### Student B

Name	Maria
Age	35
Job	Teacher in a Primary School - tiring job.
Accommodation	Large house in Madrid 10 minutes from school by car
Family	Married - 2 young children
Hobbies	Tennis if she has time
Opinion	" I am very tired sometimes, but I prefer to work hard to be independent and to help to support my small family"

### Student C

Name	Paul
Age	27
Job	Self-employed gardener Not very well paid
Accommodation	Small house with large garden in the countryside
Family	Single. Lives with his girlfriend (She has a well-paid job in London)
Hobbies	Repairing old cars
Opinion	"I prefer a job I enjoy to earning a lot of money. I don't want to have children, or at least not yet."

### Student D

Name	Ahmed
Age	40
Job	Self-employed business man (sells carpets, vases and other valuable items)
Accommodation	Large villa near the Mediterranean port of Alexandria
Family	Married with seven children. His family often meet their relatives. His wife looks after the family, but they have a housemaid and a gardener
Hobbies	He enjoys his business and his family life, but has no special hobbies
Opinion	"Family life is very important to me. We all help each other. My brother's children are like my own children."

### Follow-up Activity

Repeat performances of similar tasks are recommended to reinforce the interactive skills targeted in the first exercise. Students complete a blank worksheet for homework, effectively designing their own materials for the final conversation. The aim is to portray a "Happy Person" persuasively for a repeat group conversation in the following lesson. Once this activity has been firmly established, it is possible to replicate it at regular intervals with different topics during a course.

### A Happy Person

Complete your own table describing a real or imaginary HAPPY person. Be ready to defend your opinion in a small-group conversation.

<b>Name</b>	
<b>Age</b>	
<b>Job</b>	
<b>Accommodation</b>	
<b>Family</b>	
<b>Hobbies</b>	
<b>Opinion</b>	

## Conclusion

The skill of teaching group work depends on finding ways of intervening to improve performance without impinging on practice in the independent structuring of a conversation. Students should not feel they have no support, but should also take responsibility for keeping their own conversation going. The final speaking task is intended to be accomplished without the intervention of the teacher, who is nonetheless available to advise/motivate groups who have problems. In the final activities, students are developing their ability to survive in English and to keep a conversation going, so any intervention defeats these aims. However, demonstration of the task in whole-class sessions by the teacher and selected students, allows the teacher to intervene and forestall problems. Prediction and practice of useful language can also be attempted in the preparatory activities. Practice in turn-exchanging, checking comprehension, asking for clarification, agreeing/disagreeing, expressing opinions can all be practised independently of the tasks in the demonstration stages. In large classes, *observation* by the teacher and active classroom circulation is also recommended, to further prevent students developing a limited group-code through which they can communicate among themselves, but with no one else. Some situations may require the teacher to interrupt the task to demonstrate or troubleshoot, but the main objective of this set of exercises is to lead students in stages to a fully independent small-group conversation in English.