

Plaza

CONVERSATION MAP

Learn more about Plaza

Topic

Conversation Skill

Print a blank copy
to build your own



Opening

Breakout

Break

What about
beginners?

Warm-Up



Click each element to learn more
and see our favorite activities.

Group
Activity

Closing



These are the components
of a successful conversation
practice session. You
choose the activities.

Image by Freepik
Rev 8.21.23

Beginners

Plaza conversation tables combine people of all levels of fluency. We don't do any placement testing to join, and anyone can drop in and out at any time.

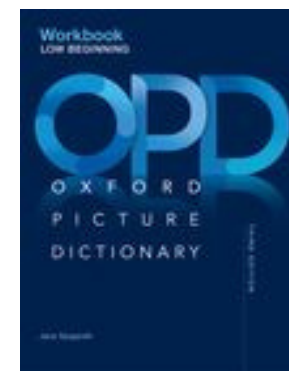


Find more
resources

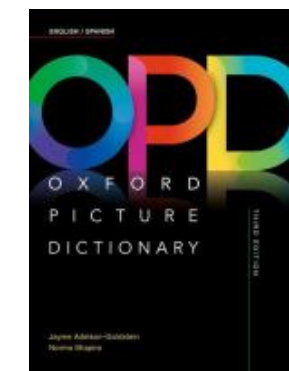
Unfortunately, joining a mixed level group can be extra hard for beginners. They are likely to feel overwhelmed and anxious. They may disengage quickly and never return to the program.

Our Recommendations

- If possible, pair a new beginner up with a volunteer or another staff member who can work with them one-on-one, or in a small group.
- Try to give the participant the choice to select their level if you have more than one group. Signs can help. We usually have one sign that says "Beginner English Practice" and another that says "English Conversation Practice."
- Help beginners get set up with any independent language learning tools they can use on their own. Most library systems have free language learning tools they can use.
- Since beginners can't spend as much time conversing or participating in group activities, it is helpful to provide a curriculum or book to guide volunteers in one-on-one sessions.



We often use the Oxford Picture Dictionary Low-Beginning Workbook for beginners in Plaza, but we allow volunteers to use what they're comfortable with.



Many have access to Mango Languages or another language learning tool with their library card.

Back to the map



Topics

The best topics for conversation groups are **practical, fun, relevant** to participants, **comfortable, broad, and visual**.

Find more
resources

What makes a **good** topic?

- Fun and interesting
- Useful
- Relevant to daily life of your participants
- Comfortable for the facilitator
- Visual
- Connected to local resources
- Many resources available
- Broad
- Accessible to beginners

See topics
that have
worked well
in Plaza

What makes a **bad** topic?

- Too abstract with no visual element
- Too specific
- Triggering or controversial
- Requires sharing personal ID info

Avoid or Handle With Care

Politics	Health
Religion	Immigration Status
Relationships	Legal Advice
Finances	Describing Appearance
Children	Death

Back to the map



Conversation Skills

[Back to the map](#)



Conversation skills are groups of phrases that can be used as tools to talk effectively about a particular subject. Choosing one lets you focus on applying grammar instead of doing grammar drills. Think about the language needed to complete conversation tasks. For example, instead of teaching grammar topics such as "present simple," try "describing what you usually do every day." This won't be the only skill you use in the lesson, but it is one you can emphasize and repeat practicing.

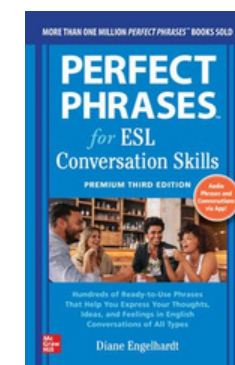
If you need ideas, there are many sources for lists of ESL conversation skills. They may also be called conversation tasks, competencies, functions, or strategies. Browsing through the table of contents in an ESL book or language proficiency standards can help you find valuable skills to practice.

See conversation
skill suggestions
paired with topics

Other Resources

MD Department of Labor
Adult ESL Standards

ESL Gold
Speaking Tasks



Favorite Topics

House & Household Items

*Talk about the things in your house.
Talk about problems or things you want to change.*

Geography

*Talk about your home town.
Talk about different areas of the world.*

Jobs

*Talk about different jobs & occupations.
Talk about what you do at work.
Describe your skills.*

Technology

*Talk about technology you use.
Ask about a technology problem.*

Birthdays & Holidays

*Describe holiday activities.
Talk about your preferences.*

Daily Activities

*Talk about hobbies.
Discuss routine.
Compare and contrast with others.
Describe what you usually do.*

Getting Around

*Ask for directions to different areas.
Talk about places in your city.
Talk about different modes of transportation.*

Invitations

*Invite someone to do something.
Accept or decline an invitation.
Clarify and explain.*

Food & Cooking

*Discuss grocery shopping.
Share a recipe.
Describe your preferences.*

Submit Your Own

Money & Shopping

*Talk about what you need.
Talk about different options, pros and cons.
Discuss likes and dislikes.*

Movies & TV

*Discuss a current show.
Talk about what you like to watch.
Agree and disagree.*

Weather

*Make small talk about weather.
Talk about severe weather.*

Time & Schedules

*Talk and ask about the time.
Talk about your availability.
Talk about significant dates and deadlines.
Talk about future plans.*

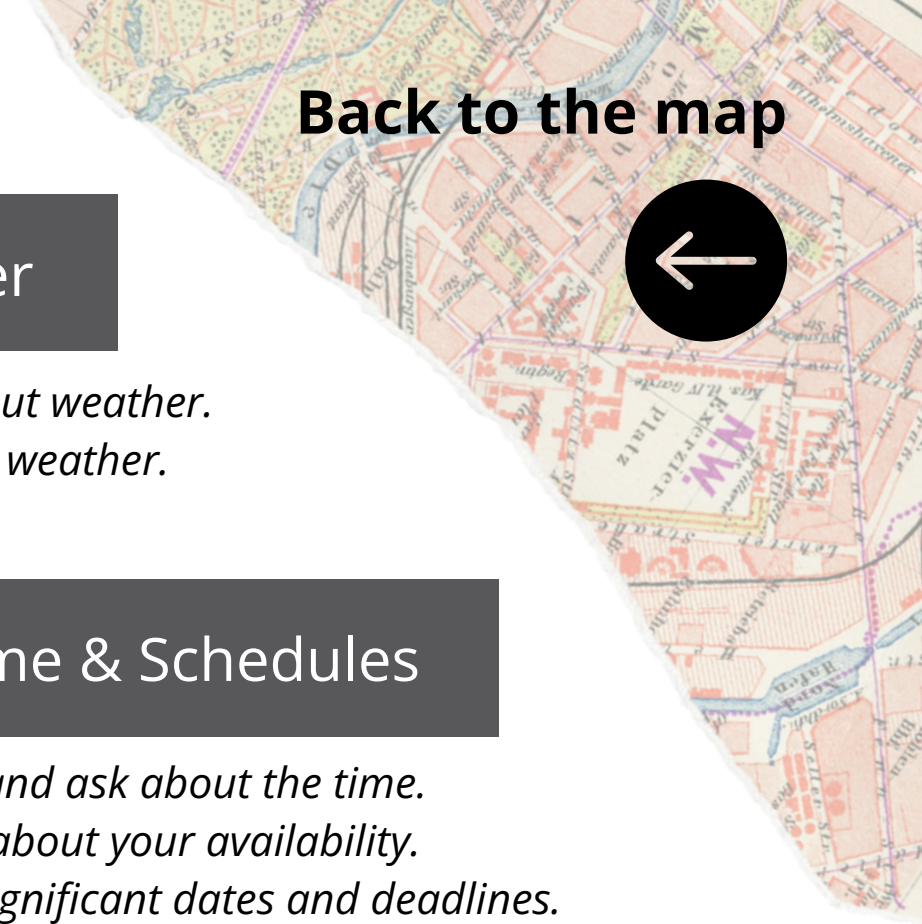
Clothing & Jewelry

*Describe what someone is wearing.
Talk about your style.
Talk about colors.
Talk about who an item belongs to.*

Sports

*Talk about what sports you like or do.
Describe an injury.
Make small talk.*

Back to the map





10 minutes

Back to the map



Opening

Goal: Let people gather.

Opening activities are designed to be semi-independent - something that people can work on as they are entering the room. They give people time to arrive and get settled in. People who arrive slightly late will feel more comfortable not interrupting a structured activity. Opening time also gives the facilitator time to finish setting up.

Make sure participants all have materials needed (pens, paper)

Write instructions clearly on a whiteboard or copy on paper.

Set up the tables in a way that encourages more interaction

If you are dividing levels, this may be a good time to do that.

Use this time to set up tables, whiteboards, markers, etc...

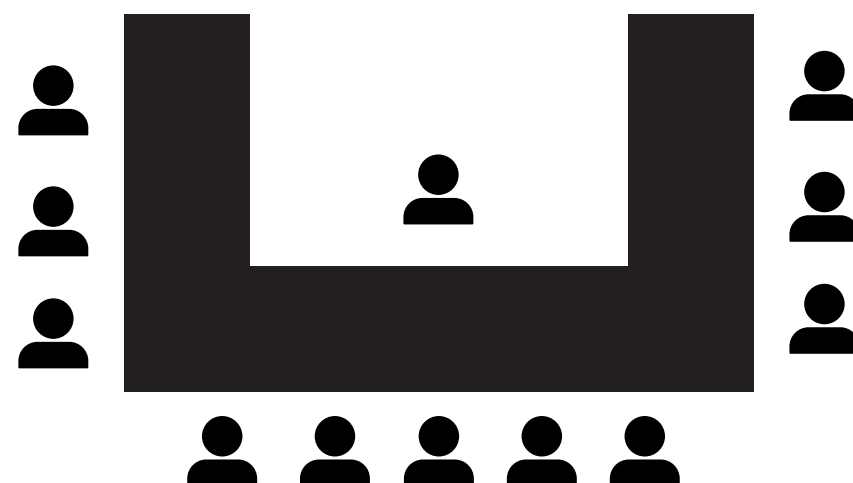
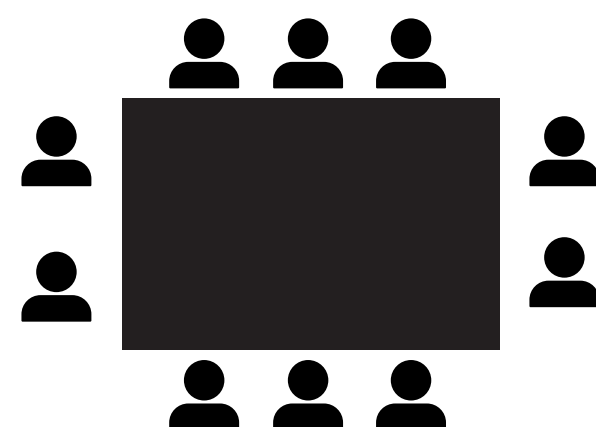
See Our Favorite Activities

Learn more about room setup

If possible, set up some refreshments.



Setting Up The Space



Adaptations for
people with
disabilities



Under Construction

Our favorite setups (if space allows) look less like traditional classrooms and more like a social setting. In these settings, the facilitator can place themselves at the same level as students, and people can connect more face to face.

Always have one more seat than you need so someone walking in feels like there is space for them.

We suggest drawing a rectangle on the board that can fit about 10 vocabulary words. As you go through the session, choose only the most important words to write here. This gives your participants something to focus on and retain from the session, and limits our natural tendency to share too much new vocabulary.

Vocabulary

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.

Back to the map



Favorite

Opening Activities

Find more
resources

Submit Your Own

01

Category Brainstorm

Choose a category and write it on the board.
People will need to write as many words as
they can think of in that category.

Example: *Things you do at work, cities in the
US, things that are round, kinds of soup*

02

Crossword Puzzle

Print crossword puzzles (one or multiple that
people can choose between) and let
participants work independently or ask for
help from their neighbors.

Tip: *Print some crosswords that use pictures for
beginners, and also have a challenge version*

03

Intro Question

Write a question on the board and ask
people to write a few sentences to prepare
to discuss more.

Tip: *Use a picture for groups
with more beginners.*

04

Picture Writing

Display a picture and ask people to
write what they can about it.

Tip: *Extend this activity into your
warm-up by discussing afterwards.*

Back to the map





15-20 minutes

W a r m - U p

Goal: Start getting comfortable.

Warm-ups bring the group together and get people talking.

Don't force people to participate.

Invite people to speak by name,
rather than waiting for a volunteer.

Make sure you stop and greet
anyone who joins late.

See Our
Favorite
Activities

Let people know they can
engage in different ways.

Give everyone a chance to speak.

Make name tags, name tents,
or write names on the board.

Avoid "where are you from?"

Most Plaza programs have established a practice to avoid asking people the question, "where are you from?" Read the article below for more explanation.

Harvard Business
Review

Back to the map



Favorite

Warm-Ups

01

Introductions

Introduce yourself and answer an icebreaker question.

***Example:** What gets you out of bed?*

02

Name Origin

Start with the facilitator talking about where their name comes from. Then, participants can share the origin of their name.

***Tip:** This activity is simple, but there is always something new to learn.*

03

Picture Discussion

Start with a very broad question open to the whole group, like "What do you see in this picture?" This leaves space for a variety of answers. People can talk about what colors they see or what kind of people are in the picture or where the picture might be taken. Give time for people to think and respond. It's okay if the group is quiet for little bit. You can also ask more direct questions (what is this person doing)?

***Tip:** Avoid avoid images depicting violence, aftermath of disaster, military, etc*

04

Compare & Contrast

Choose two pictures or items, and ask participants to discuss the similarities and differences between them.

***Examples:** A picture of your city now and many years ago.
Two cans of soda.*

05

Guess The Vocab Word

Show or give clues and participants try to guess the word. For example, if the word is "teacher" you can show pictures of a classroom or teaching items. You can also describe the actions a teacher might do.

***Tip:** If you can present a screen, you can quickly access visual aids by [searching Google images](#).*

Find more resources

Submit Your Own

Back to the map



06

Word of the Day

At beginning of the session, share the word with the group. Let the group know that every time a person uses the word throughout the session, correctly in a sentence or phrase they will get a point.

***Tip:** You can decide if there is a prize for the winner (sticker, candy, honorable mention)*



15-20 minutes

Breakouts

Goal: Get people connecting.

These activities allow people to work together in groups 2 of 3. They are a chance for people to take a break from the whole group, get to know their partner better, and get more speaking time. They are also a good opportunity for the facilitator to check in with people who were not engaged with the larger group.

Write instructions clearly on a whiteboard or copy on paper.

Demonstrate an example first with a participant or a staff member.

Use a timer that is visible to all participants.

See Our
Favorite
Activities

Back to the map



Favorite

Breakouts

01

Speaker/Listener

Set a period of time - 1 or 2 minutes. Give a speaking prompt. One person listens to the other talk without interrupting, then they summarize what the person said.

Tip: For higher levels, increase the speaking time.

02

Pick Your Favorite

Give a list of things in a category. Partners discuss to choose their favorite.

Tip: Brainstorm a list together first as a group activity.

03

Magazine Search

Partners choose a magazine together. Give an instruction for something to find in the magazine. Afterwards, share with the group why you made that choice. Also works with program brochures or other materials that might be available.

Examples: Find a recipe or an ad you like.

04

Pair Share

Participants pair up with a partner. Provide an open-ended question for each person to answer and give time for each person to answer to their partner. Then, each person shares their partner's answer with the rest of the group.

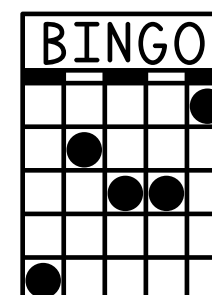
Tip: The facilitator should also participate

05

Conversation Bingo

Hand out cards to each person. Each square on the card should be requesting a different piece of information or be asking a different question, one that would be easy to answer. After each person has a card they should all get up and go around asking others in the group for information on the card with the goal of finding information for 5 questions in a row.

Tip: Model this activity first to the whole group



Create a Bingo card

Back to the map



More Ideas

BogglesWorldESL

Submit Your Own

Find more
resources

06

Go Fish

Participants have cards with words or phrases. They need to ask questions to find out if others have the same card, word, or idea.

Tip: Write a basic dialogue structure on the board so participants can follow along and practice asking questions correctly.



10 minutes

B r e a k

Goal: Just take a break.

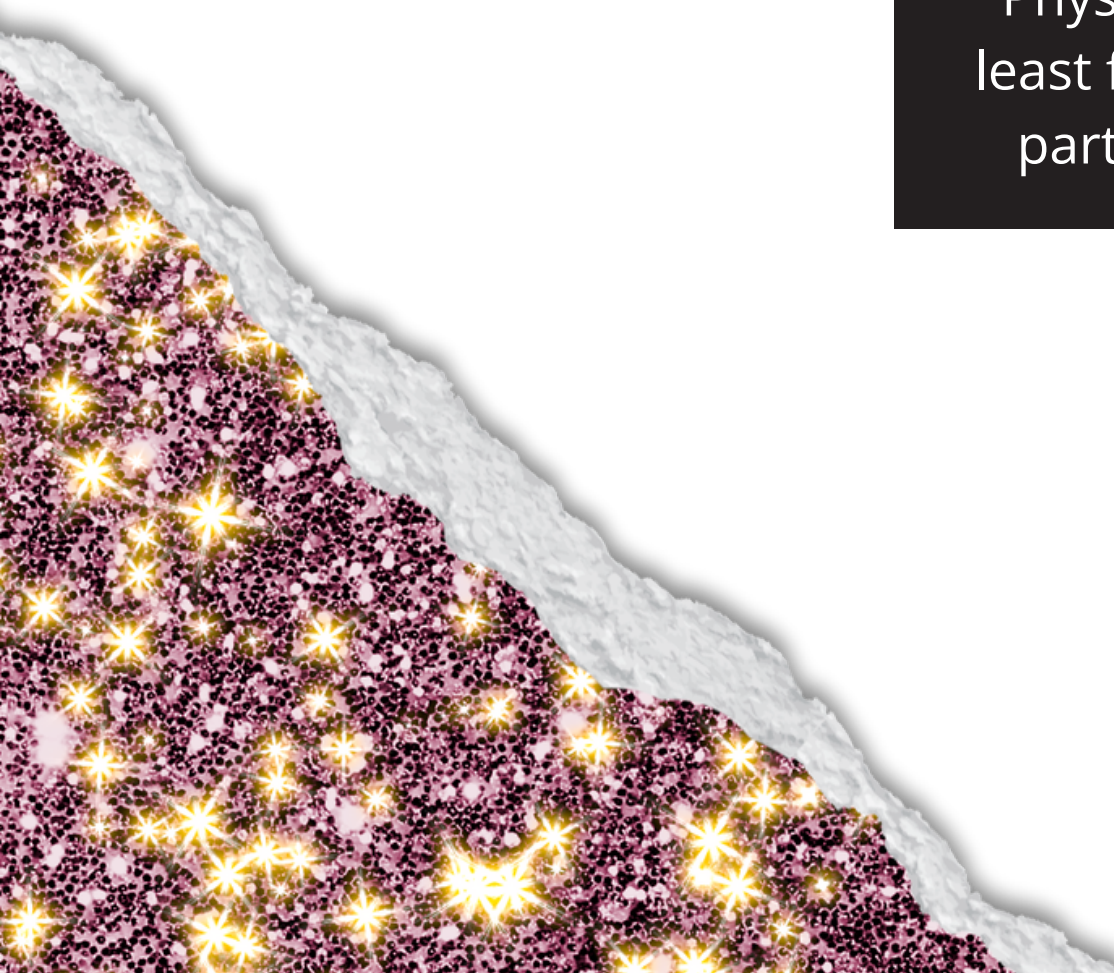
Breaks are an important part of conversation groups. In fact, we have observed some of the most important things in Plaza happen during breaks. Be sure to give yourself and your participants time and permission to relax.

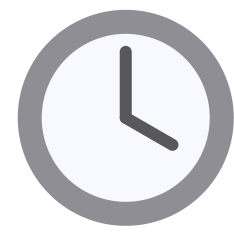
Physically leave the space, at least for a few minutes, so that participants know they can.

A warm beverage can make people feel safe and confident. We offer at least coffee and tea in every Plaza.

Use this time to adjust any plans for the remaining time.

Back to the map





20 Minutes

Group Activity

[Back to the map](#)



Goal: Have fun while interacting and learning from the whole group.
These activities should be fun for larger, mixed-level groups to do together.
They engage everyone in the group in a variety of ways.

See Our
Favorite
Activities

Good warm-up activities also make
good group activities.

Feel free to incorporate people
outside of your group.

Favorite Group Activities

01

Map Activity

Use a map to talk about various prompts. For example, "where have you visited before," or "where do you want to visit?"

Extension: Do a geography quiz together.

02

20 Questions

Participants will ask yes/no questions to guess a target word. You can use any flashcard set, the game Headbanz, words written on paper, or objects in a bag.

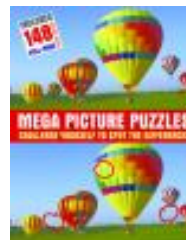
Tip: Practice creating yes/no questions beforehand so people know the difference between yes/no and open-ended.

03

Picture Differences

Participants look as a group at two seemingly identical pictures with small differences. When they spot a difference, they have to describe it out loud to the group so that others can find it.

Tip: Use books (below) or find sources for pictures online (right).



04

Fishbowl

Collect vocabulary from any activity. Write the words on slips of paper and put them in a small bowl or the center of the table. Divide into two teams, with one guesser on each team. You can play in 3 rounds. In the first round, people need to guess the words based on a description. In the second round, participants can use gestures, similar to charades. In the third round, you can only use one word as a clue.

Tip: Read through the words before you start so that everyone knows what they are.

More Ideas

iSL Collective

Go Overseas

New York Times

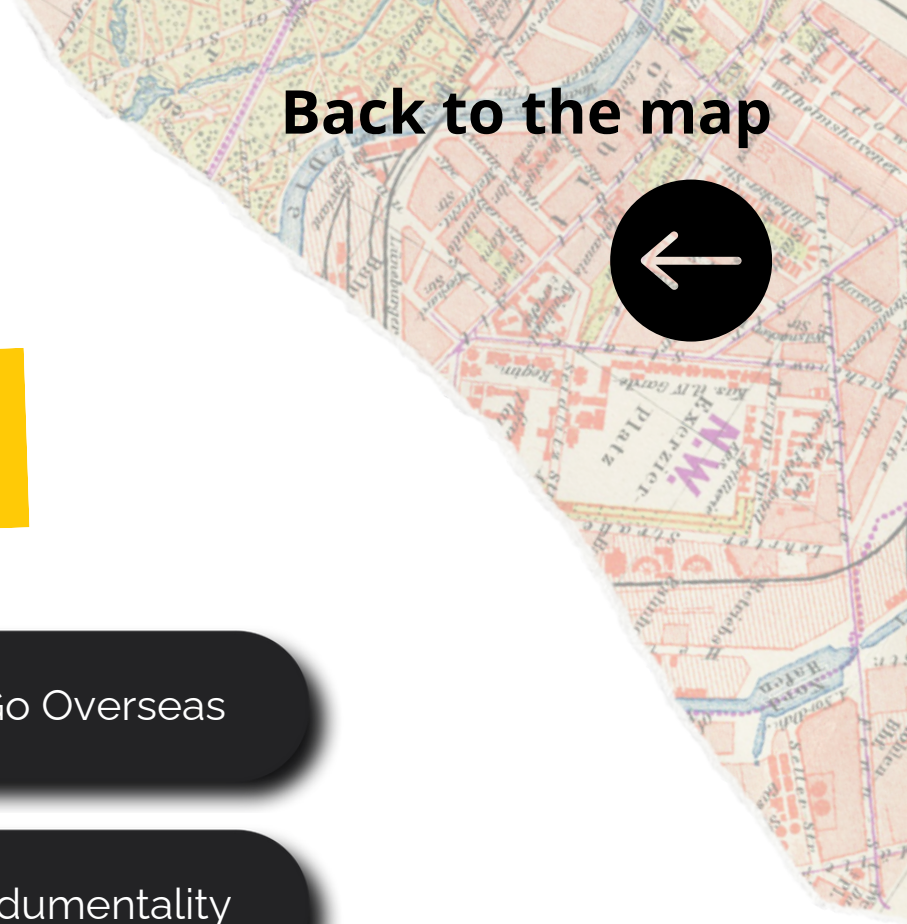
Edmentality

Submit Your Own

Find more
resources

Click here to see
our favorite
board games.

Back to the map



Favorite

Games



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resources



10 Minutes

Closing

Back to the map



Goal: Create pattern and structure; finish intentionally.

End the session by asking for feedback, allowing requests for future topics, giving action items or suggestions for more practice, and making announcements.

Get feedback about your session so you can adapt it in future.

Make a connection to other events or resources in the community.

Encourage people to use a variety of tools to practice on their own.

See Our
Favorite
Activities

Favorite

Closing Activities

01

Share a Mantra

Share a word or phrase that can help motivate and inspire people throughout the coming week.

Tip: Choose something that is meaningful to you and share why.

02

Topic Choice

Using a resource such as a picture dictionary, allow participants to choose a topic they are interested in for future discussions.

Alternative: Give a choice between two topics you already have prepared.

03

Five Finger Feedback

Allow participants to hold up 1 finger if the lesson was easy for them, up to 5 if the session was very difficult.

Tip: Having written instructions or a visual is very helpful.

04

Announcements

Talk about upcoming programs, events, classes and more. This can help participants stay engaged with each other outside of the group.

Tip: Give out printed schedules. Participants can take them home to read and ask questions next time.

05

Pair Share

Tell the person next to you two things you have learned today. Then tell the group what two things your partner said.

Extension: Also ask for one thing they would like to learn next time.

More Ideas

Edutopia

Teach Starter

Teaching expertise

Submit Your Own

Back to the map



More

Resources

Interesting Pictures

New York
Times

Voices of
America

ESL Vault

BrainPop

Lesson Plans & Activities

New York
Times

Voices of
America

Literacy MN

ThoughtCO

TEFLLessons

Vocabulary

Quizlet

Voices of
America

Back to the map

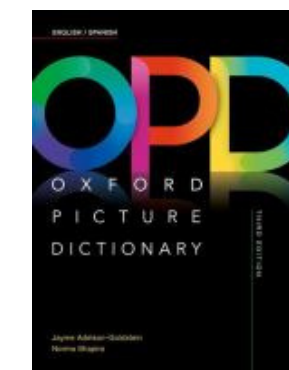


Conversation Topics

iTESLj

All Things
Topics

More Books



Back to the map



What is Plaza?

Plaza is a series of weekly and year-round library programs established in 2008 within Denver Public Library. These programs create inclusive spaces for people from all over the world to connect with resources and meet new people. Many come to practice a language, prepare for citizenship, pursue goals, and create their future. Whatever you're doing, we can help!

Why This Resource?

Plaza staff have been leading conversation groups for years without a curriculum. We use a variety of materials and overcome the many challenges that come along with drop-in programs, mixed level groups, frequent disruptions, limited preparation time, and a busy (and sometimes chaotic) environment. Through the years, we have collaborated and created many strategies and shared practices that help create some structure within an ever-changing environment while creating space for participants to connect and learn from one another. We wanted to share these strategies and encourage others to build community in thoughtful, creative and inspiring ways.

Thank you to the following Plaza staff who contributed to this resource

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