Teaching materials-free has never been easier with these tools from ReflectESOL and others. Try the 'Brexit with a Tree' lesson.

<https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/blogs/linda-ruas/materials-free-teach>

Brexit, the Tree, the River and the Five Circles

Great! – no materials! – no photocopying! – no wasted paper! – no boring worksheets!

But if we have no materials, we usually need something to give the lesson some appearance of structure to fill the place of the book or handouts.

a) Brexit and the Tree:

How about a lesson to help all the learners use everything they’ve heard and felt about Brexit, using a Tree? This is one of the many tools from Reflect ESOL, an excellent, materials-light, participatory approach, originally intended for ESOL learners. However, these tools, and the approach are also very useful for any types of English teaching, especially when you want to get learners to have a lot more control of content and to critically reflect on issues that affect them.

So back to the ‘Brexit’ lesson. Get learners, in groups of 4 or 5 to create a ‘cause and effect tree’ on a large sheet of flip chart paper, and then present it to others and compare their trees. Each group draws a tree with both branches and roots, and discuss to decide on various causes of Brexit to write along the roots, one on each, and effects of Brexit to write on the branches of the tree. They can, of course, customise their tree by adding fruits, flowers, birds, butterflies, mould and moss which can represent other things; and/or arrows to link various causes and effects. You can, of course, also use the ‘tree’ to get learners to explore simpler topics like pollution, or complex global issues e.g.. equality, fundamentalism or feminism.

b) The River:

If your discussion or topic is about a process, you could do a similar lesson using a ‘river diagram’. Learners, in groups, create a huge ‘river’ on a large sheet of paper eg. about the development of their own English, the history of their own country, the life cycle of a cup of tea from planting of a seed to washing up the tea-cup, or renewable energy. Or you could use the visual image of a human body with groups working on labelling various parts and idiomatic phrases associated with body parts.

This ‘participatory approach’ is particularly useful for involving learners’ personal opinions and pasts. Linked to several movements for social change, the Reflect ESOL movement emerged from Paulo Freire’s work and the need to involve learners actively in struggles that are relevant to them, for example, funding cuts to ESOL in the UK, justice for domestic workers, and even post-war community development in Afghanistan and Uganda. Learners find their opinions valued and grow in confidence by working in groups labelling, discussing and deciding how their various points relate to, for example, local problems with water or education, national issues with transport or tax, and international political issues like war, refugees and migration. Look at the downloadable Reflect ESOL resource pack for many more ideas and materials-free tools: <http://www.reflect-action.org/reflectesol>

c) The 5 Circles:

One of my favourite, flexible materials-free lessons, however, is the ‘circles of my life’. I'm afraid I've forgotten where the idea originally came from, but it has always got learners 100% engaged and interacting, and can be used to feed in, review or practise almost any area of grammar.

The initial creation of the personal ‘circles of my life’ takes a few minutes, but can then be re-used many times for different areas of language and topics.

Learners take a sheet of A4 and draw a big circle in the middle, taking up a third of the page, then draw five other circles of roughly similar size around it, interlocking both with the inner circle and the adjoining circles. They then add initials, not names: their own in the centre of the middle circle, and 5 or 6 others in each of the other circles (which each represent a different area of their life eg. family, sports friends, neighbours, in-laws, work/school friends etc.); if people are in 2 different categories, they go in the overlap between 2 circles; and if they are closest to you of the category, they go in the overlap with the central circle. The easiest way of getting learners to do all this is obviously to demonstrate with your own. And, to be honest, it doesn't really matter where the initials go, all that matters is that learners will now all have 20 – 30 initials of different people from different areas of their life in front of them that they can now describe, speculate about and discuss.

A simple starter task with the circles is to pair off learners and get them to take turns pointing to an initial in their partner’s diagram and ask what that person is doing at that exact moment. You can feed in or review the present continuous with a few examples from your own circles, add language of speculation, then listen and note down errors for post task error correction. Make sure you change partners regularly, and you have a truly authentic, personalised speaking task. You can extend this to writing: write as many sentences as you can remember in 5 minutes afterwards; and to almost any language area (describe this person; what do you think this person likes eating and drinking?; what was this person doing last weekend/November; describe this person’s job/ambitions/ideal holiday; what do you think this person will be doing in 2050?, what would this person do if they had to leave their country; and finally, what do you think this person thinks about Brexit?

So, materials-free, but structured, visual, learner-centred and ensuring the engagement of all – what could be better?