

# ELT



## Ireland bulletin

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# Making Content More Relevant to Students - How to do it.

by Ana Carolina Cardoso Bedenik

Connecting content to learners is important in order to engage students in the lessons and build rapport with them. As teachers, we have always been told that we need to make content relevant to students. In an ideal world, we would only teach things which are relevant to our students and of interest to them. However, when we need to follow a coursebook and a syllabus, this does not

happen as often as we would like. Many colleagues have reported the difficulty and time-consuming nature of trying to relate what they need to teach to their students' lives.

Although it is not always easy and we might feel that we lack creativity on some days, there are a few simple things we can do to make our lessons a bit more personal and relevant to students.

“One idea, which is quite simple, is keep the activity but change the subject or the people.”

## Adapting activities from the coursebook

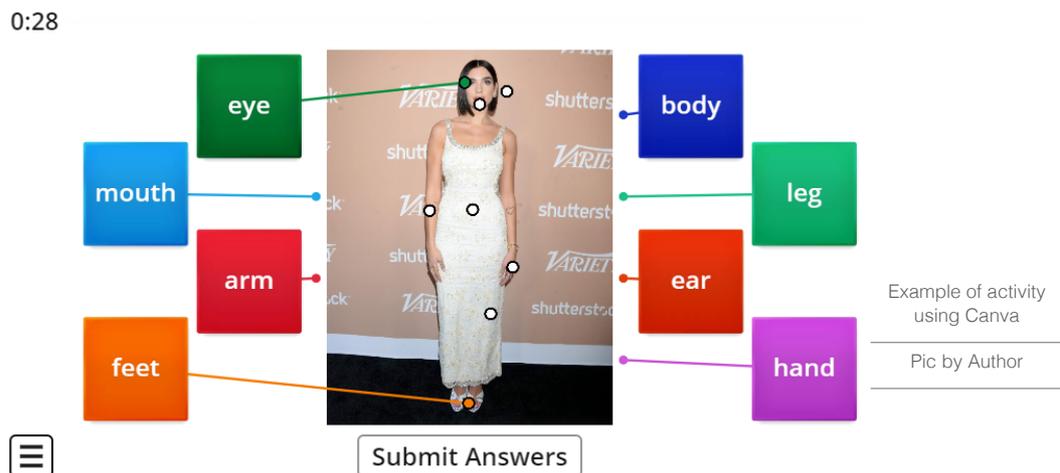
It is not unusual to come across activities in the coursebooks that do not really speak to our students. For example, asking tweens to describe George Clooney's appearance or students who are not into sports to write about their favorite sportsperson. They are not bad activities, and many times their aim is good, they just need a little twist.

One idea, which is quite simple, is keep the activity but change the subject or the people. If the activity requires the student to ask and answer questions about a famous actor and you know they are interested in basketball, you can easily make a card with important information about a player and use that instead.

Another idea is, when talking about appearance, use actors or characters from their favorite TV shows to create a Guess Who game. In order to do this in a time-efficient way, you can use ready templates that can be found online, create your own on Canva or simply give students a list of characters or actors. It is more likely they will remember the vocabulary if they associate it with something they see often.

## Using students' interests to present a new topic

This is a good way to engage them in what you want to teach. Let's say you are teaching parts of the body. I used to love using sticky notes in the pre-pandemic world and face-to-face teaching. Students would be in pairs and put the sticky notes, that had parts of the body written on them, on each other, or even on the teacher, that was great fun. However, this has changed with online teaching and we have to find other ways to keep them engaged. So, why not use a photo of their favorite singer to teach them parts of the body? Here is an example of an activity that was created in less than five minutes using a photo of Dua Lipa and the website Wordwall.



Using students' interests to present a topic does not take long. You can find photos, movies and songs that they like and that are easily accessible on the internet. These can be used to create simple activities such as describing a scene of their favorite movie, teaching the present continuous or reading the lyrics of a song they enjoy to try to work out the rules of a grammar topic.

An example of this was an activity created using Jamboard for a student who is a fan of Taylor Swift. She had to read the lyrics and choose between possessive adjectives and possessive pronouns. Afterwards, she listened to the song to check her answers to try find out why one was used instead of the other. This was very productive as she had the chance to work out the grammar rule by herself and also had fun listening to a singer she liked. It was definitely more meaningful than if we had just gone through the rules and some examples that weren't relevant to her interests.

### Using students' lives and experiences to present grammar topics

This is one of my favourites. It requires little or no preparation and all we need is a board, whether it is a physical one or the whiteboard on Zoom.

I like to use it a lot when teaching B2 First classes, because they already know the grammar topics and it is usually a review, so taking a personal situation works wonders when trying to elicit a sentence using third conditional, for example.

Once I drew on the students' experience when working with mixed conditionals. One of them had mentioned she had slept badly the previous night, so I took advantage of that to illustrate the topic.

Another time was when I wanted students to revise *seem like*, *look as if* and these kinds of structures. As they were all friends from school and used to joke about arguing with each other, I wrote a little story about them fighting and apologizing. They got really engaged because they wanted to know where the story was going and they even suggested some sentences and different ways to say what I wrote. That obviously required a bit more preparation, but still, it wouldn't take you more than ten minutes to create a few sentences using your students' lives as the main topic.

Pedro **looks angry**.  
 { appears + adjective  
 seems

Pedro and Diogo **look as if they're fighting**.  
 subject + look as if + sentence

They **seem to be fighting**.  
 { appear + infinitive

It **seems as if Thiago doesn't want to argue with them**.  
 appears as if + sentence  
 looks as if

They **seem to be apologizing**.

They **look like friends again!**  
 { seem like + noun

Example of activity using Whiteboard

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Pic by Author

Both examples were from B2 First classes, but that doesn't mean it doesn't work with lower levels. Once in an A2 class, I had planned to teach modals of obligation using school rules. However, at the beginning of the class they told me they were going on a camping trip. That was the perfect opportunity to include their forthcoming trip in our class. I gave them the beginning of the sentences and asked them to complete them with things related to the trip. The result was surprising, as they managed to create more sentences than I predicted and kept talking for longer than I expected them to. They showed genuine interest in that.

### Using students' interests for extra practice

Sometimes it can be more difficult to use something students like to present a new grammar topic or vocabulary. When this happens, we can always try to use their interests when doing a controlled or freer practice exercise. This tends to be helpful when they really like something in their native language, such as a TV show or a song. In this case, it is harder to illustrate a grammar topic, for example, using lines from the TV show, but we can use scenes as the basis for a gap-fill activity, for example.

I have tried this with a class who was keen on Big Brother Brasil. As the whole program is in Portuguese, I did some research on the internet about the participants and found some photos of them on the show. Then, I turned that into a gap-fill exercise in which students had to complete the sentences using simple present or present continuous.

Example of activity using Baamboozle

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Pic by Author

### **Do we always have to cater for students' interests?**

If relating content to students' lives and likes is this important, does it mean we have to do this all the time? Do we need to adapt every single thing from coursebooks?

It might be argued that by trying to relate the content of the lessons to what students enjoy outside the classroom we might be depriving ourselves of the chance to introduce them to new things like other cultures, different writers and genres, and TV programs they do not know and would perhaps take to. And that is why I believe there needs to be a balance.

Taking my context as an example, I would not change a text from the coursebook that talks about Hogmanay and replace it with one talking about Carnival just because the students like and are familiar with this festival. I want them to know other cultures as part of learning a new language is also knowing the culture of the countries where that language is spoken. On the other hand, if my students have never watched a Jude Law movie, I do not think an activity that asks them to find out if Jude Law is his actual name would bring any benefit.

In other words, we need to know our students and their interests, as well as what might or might not be relevant, in order to make the best decision when adapting materials.

### **Tools that can make our lives easier**

There are many options available for us when we want to create a new activity or adapt something from the coursebook to make it more dynamic.

If you want something quick, Wordwall offers a great variety of activity templates and all you have to do is type your questions. It takes less than five minutes to create an activity.

When choosing to design your own game, such as the Guess Who mentioned, I strongly suggest using Canva as once you create a template, you can easily edit it for other classes. This way, although it might take you longer the first time, it is something you can reuse time and time again.

Bamboozle and Blooket are good options when you want to use games. You can include pictures and personalize the questions based on your students' interests, and they come in handy when you are tired of students' asking to play Kahoot every class.

### **Conclusion**

Both teachers and students can benefit when lessons are made more personal and, despite what many may think, preparing something that caters a little more for the students' tastes is not that time-consuming, especially if you prepare activities that can be reused.

With so many resources available, it is worth giving it a shot as this usually results in more motivated learners. Having said that, try to always keep a balance between what students are keen on and new things that they might become interested in once they have the chance to learn about.



#### **About the Author:**

Ana Carolina Cardoso Bedenik is an ESL teacher based in Brazil. She has been teaching for 10 years and currently works as an online private teacher and a Cambridge speaking examiner. Ana holds a B.A. in Languages (UNESP), the CELTA, the TKT certificates and the Train the Trainer.

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