

# CONVERSATION MAP

Learn more about Plaza

Topic

Conversation Skill

Print a blank copy to build your own



Opening

Warm-Up

Breakout

Break

What about beginners?



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 8.15.23

# 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.

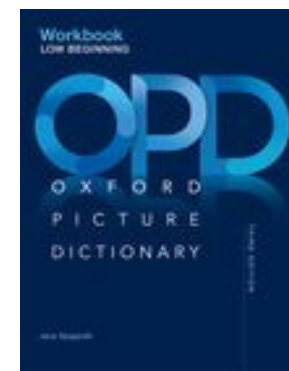


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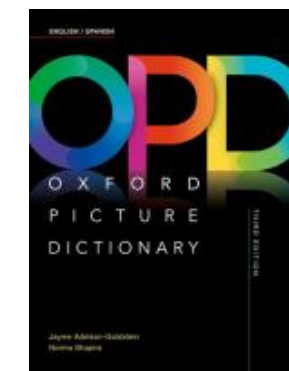
Unfortunately, joining a mixed level group can be extra hard for beginners. They are likely to feel overwhelmed and anxious. They may disengage quickly and never return to the program.

## 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 participate 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.

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# 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

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# Conversation Skills

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Conversation skills are groups of phrases that can be used as tools to talk effectively about a particular subject. Choosing a conversation skill goal to focus on lets you focus on applying grammar instead of doing grammar drills. Think about the language you need for the skill you chose. For example, instead of teaching grammar topics such as "present simple," practice "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. Looking at ESL book tables of contents or language proficiency standards can help you find valuable skills to practice.

See conversation  
skill suggestions  
paired with topics



## House & Household Items

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

# Favorite Topics

## 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*

## Submit Your Own

## Money & Shopping

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

## 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.*

## 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.*

## Movies & TV

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

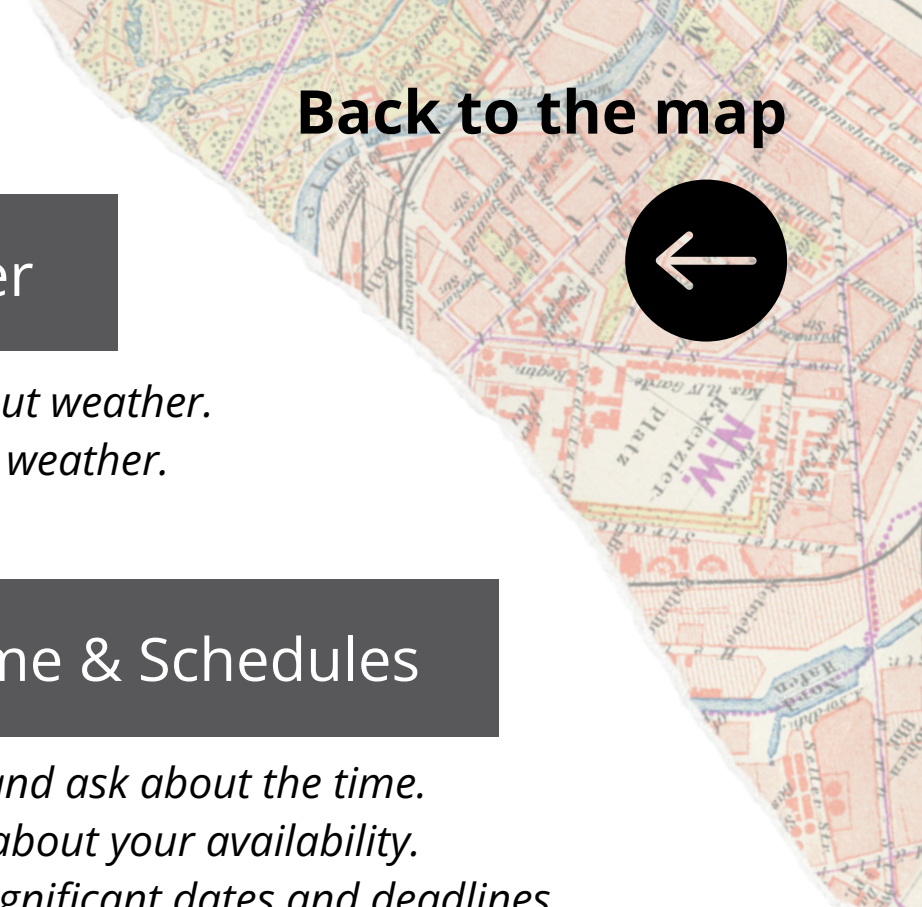
## Clothing & Jewelry

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

## Sports

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

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10 minutes

# Opening

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## 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 give 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

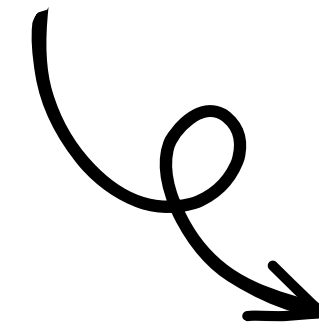
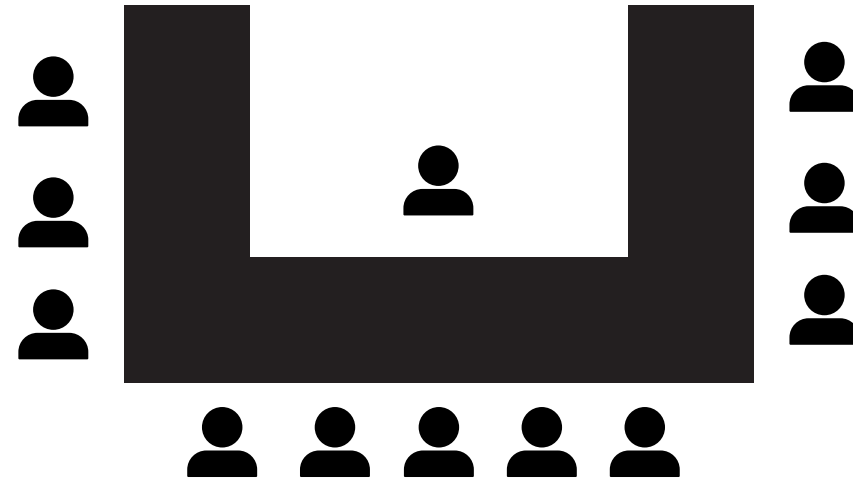
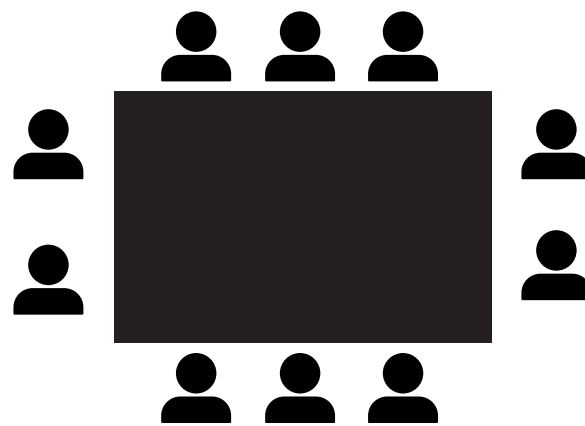




If possible, set up some drinks or refreshments.



## Setting Up The Space

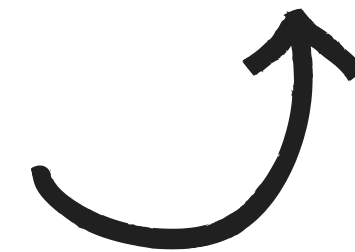


Our favorite setups (if space allows) look less like traditional classrooms and more like a social setting. In these settings, the facilitator can place themselves at the same level as students, and people can connect more face to face.

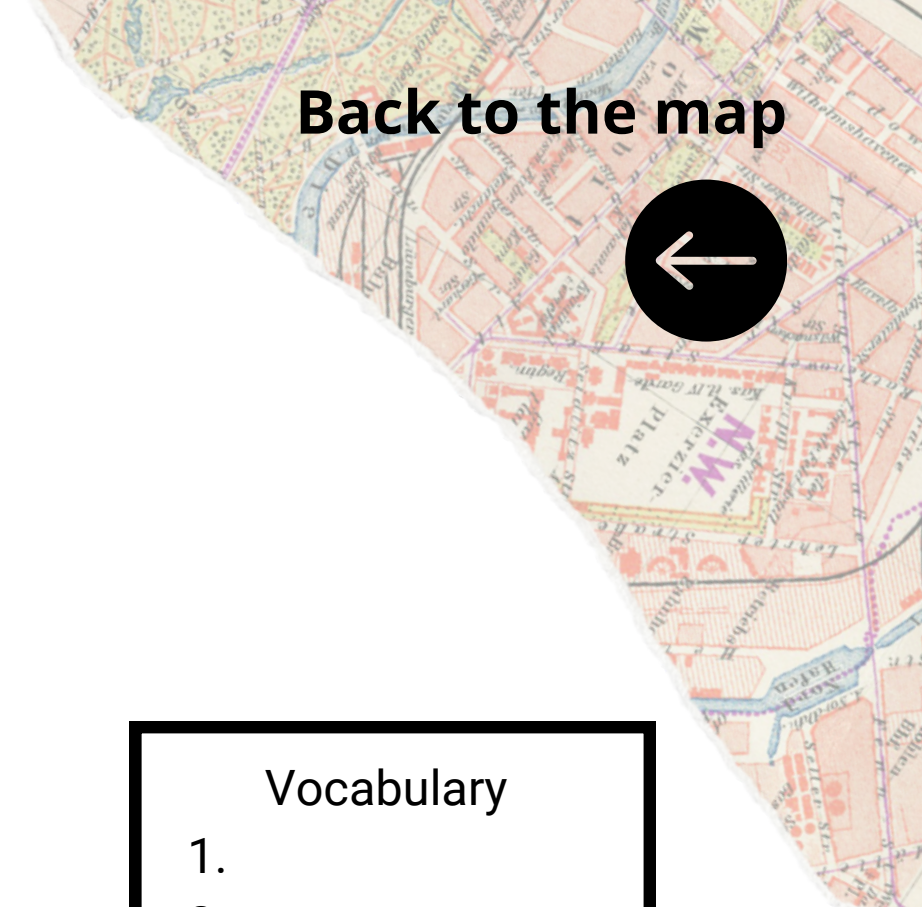
We suggest drawing a rectangle on the board that can fit about 10 vocabulary words. As you go through the session, choose only the most important words to write here. This gives your participants something to focus on and retain from the session, and limits our natural tendency to share too much new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

### Vocabulary

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



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Favorite

# Opening Activities

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Submit Your Own

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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.*





15-20 minutes

# Warm-Up

**Goal: Start getting comfortable.**

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

Don't force people to participate

Let people know they can engage in different ways

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

Give everyone a chance to speak

Make sure you stop and greet anyone who joins late

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

See Our  
Favorite  
Activities

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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, display google images to search quickly for what you want*

06

## Word of the Day

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

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

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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

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# 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.

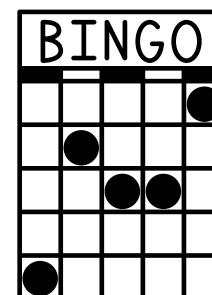
*Tip: The facilitator should also participate*

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

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## More Ideas

BogglesWorldESL

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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

# Break

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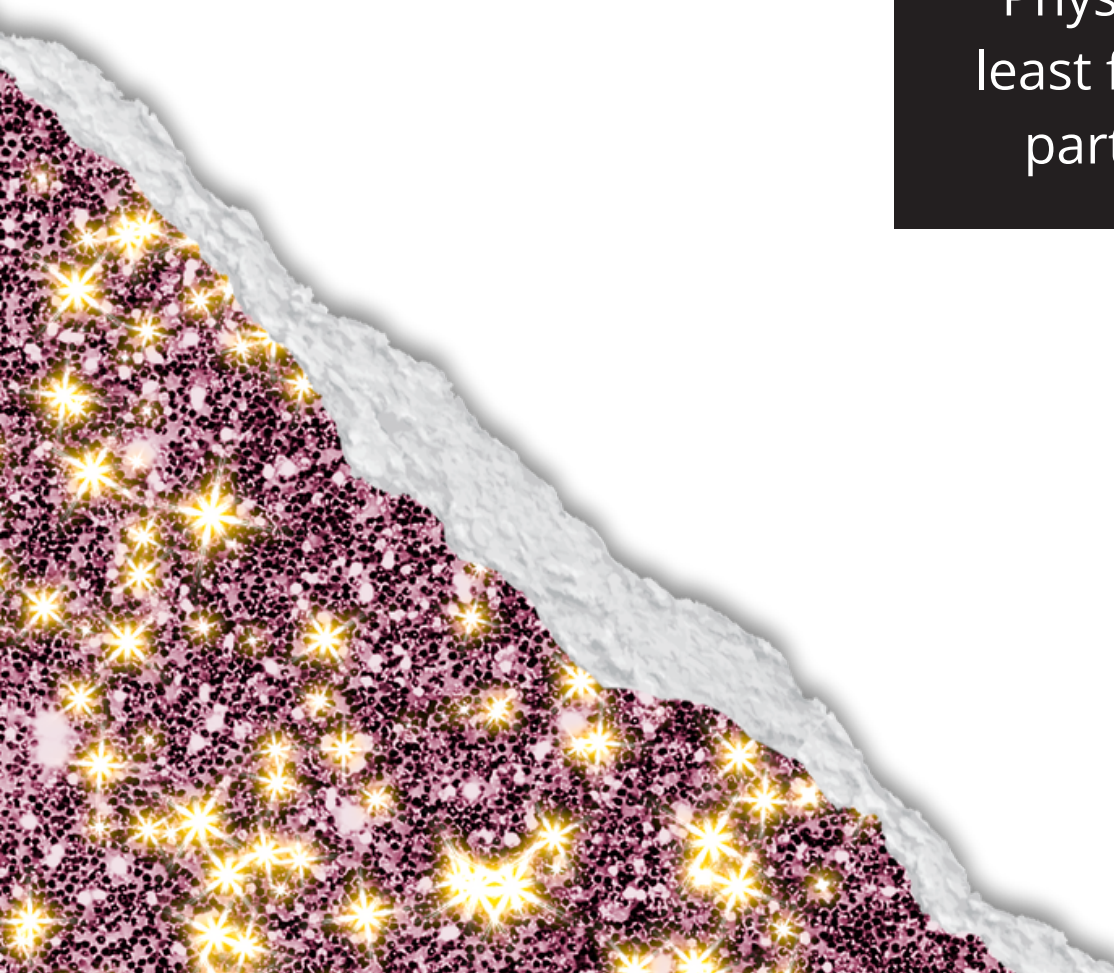
## Goal: Just take a break.

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.







20 Minutes

# Group Activity



**Goal: Have fun while interacting and learning from the whole group.**  
Activities that are fun for larger, mixed-level groups to do together. They engage everyone in the group in a variety of ways.

Good warm-up activities also make good group activities.

Feel free to incorporate people outside of your group.

See Our Favorite Activities





# 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 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

Edumentality

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board games.

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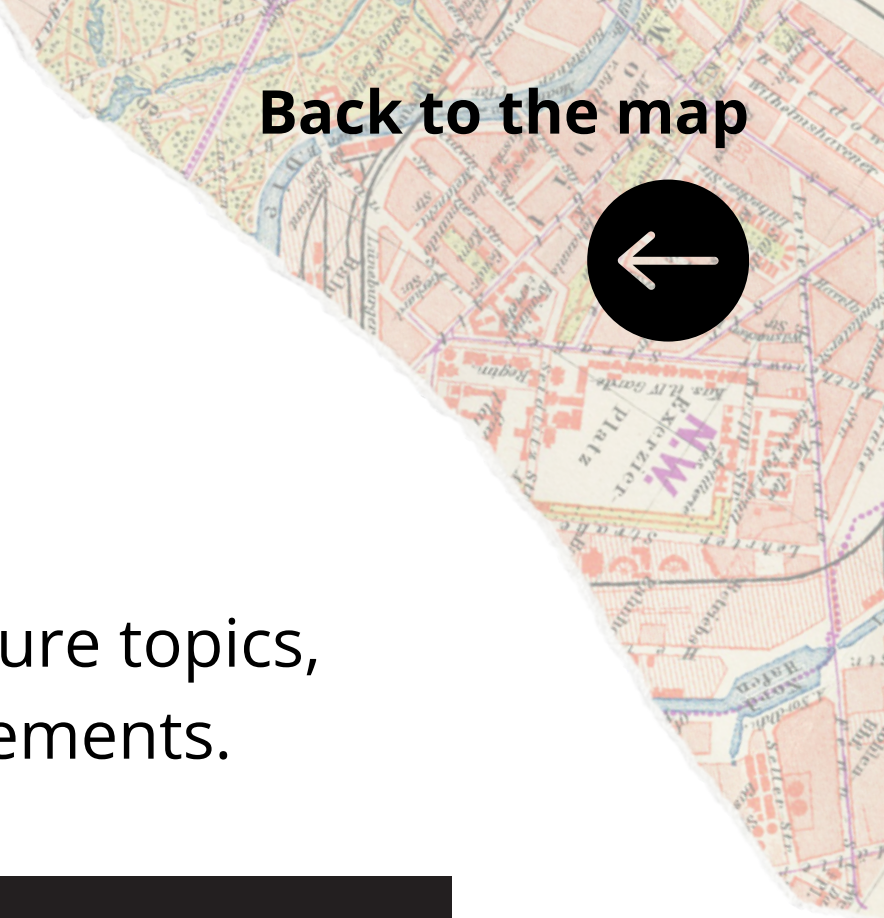
Find more resources





10 Minutes

# Closing



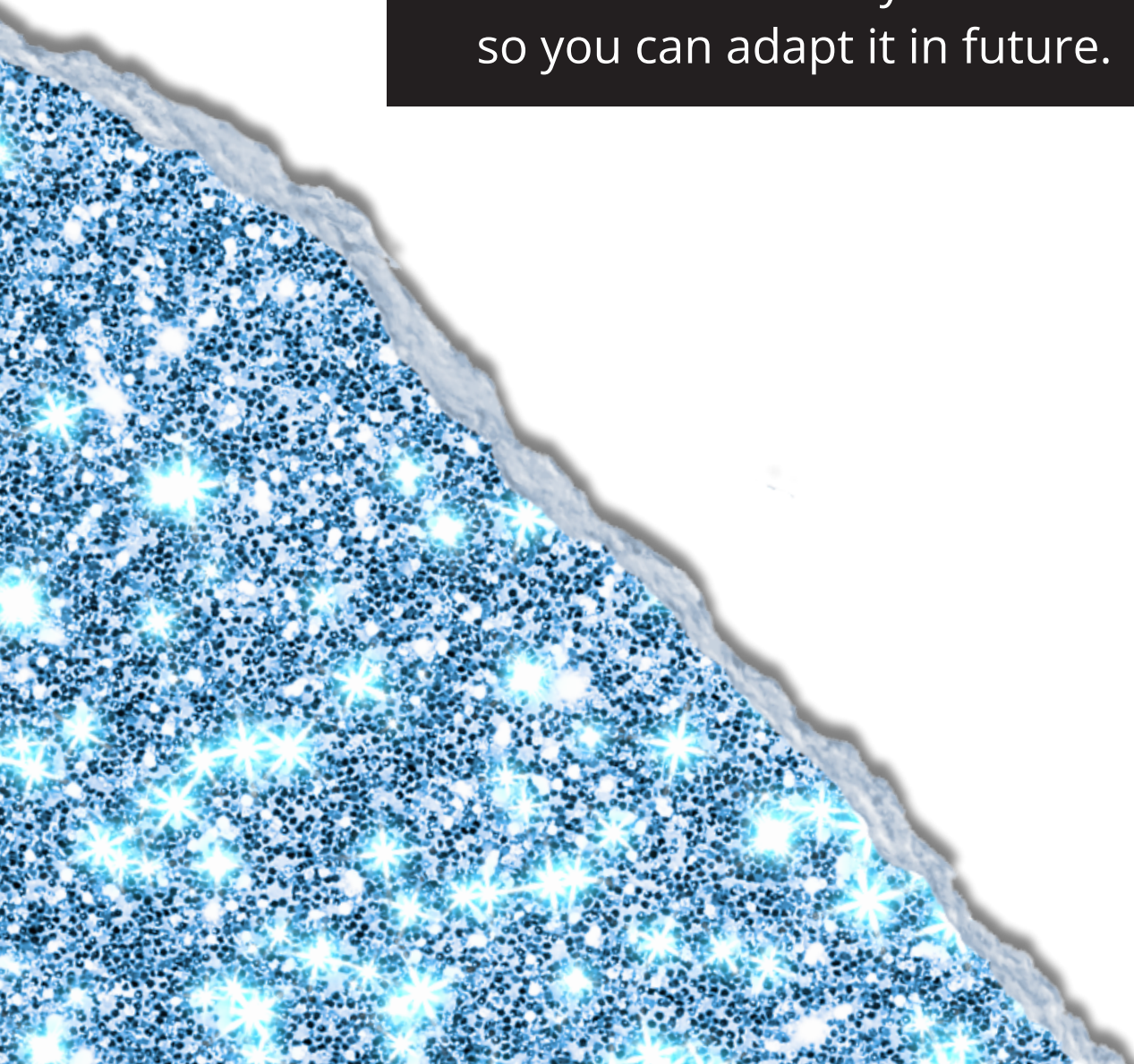
**Goal: Create pattern and structure; finish intentionally.**

End the session intentionally 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.*

06

### 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: Have participants write what they learned, then exchange and read others' writing out loud.*

## More Ideas

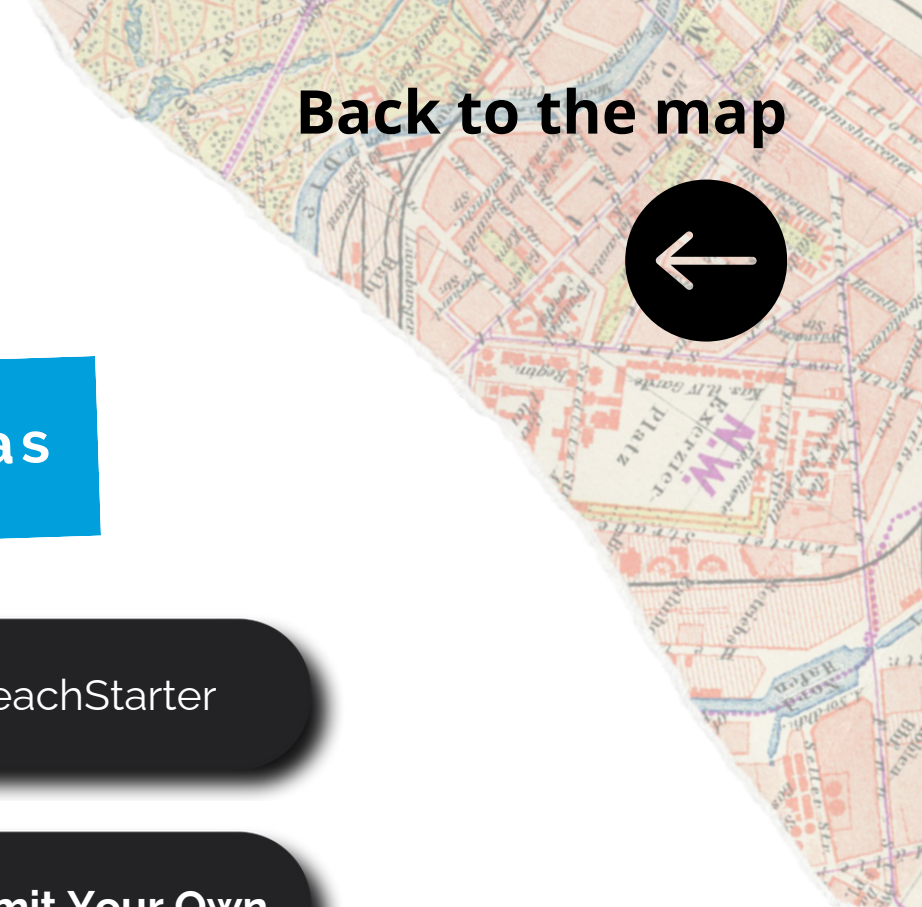
[Edutopia](#)

[Teach Starter](#)

[Teachingexpertise.com](#)

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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

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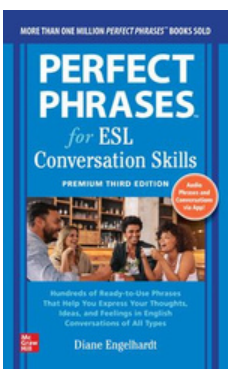
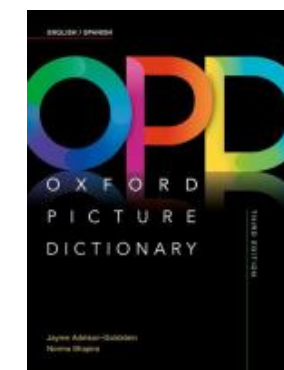
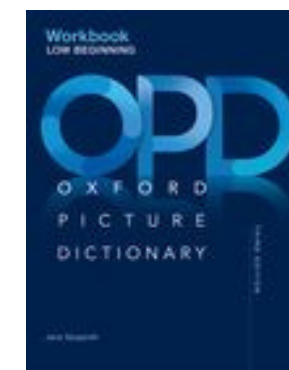


## Conversation Topics

iTESLj

All Things Topics

## More Books





## 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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## Other Info

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