

S.O.S. CONVERSATION LESSON WITH AUNTY EMMA

BULLETPOINTS:

Topic: Aunty Emma, a testament;

Level: pre-intermediate to advanced;

Time: 30–60 min;

Material: whiteboard and marker;

Preparation time: none;

Skill: speaking;

Function: (dis)agreement, negotiating;

Group size: min. 2 students.

S.O.S. – FOR THE SAKE OF SUBSTITUTION

In your career, you might well be asked, even at short notice, to jump in for a colleague and take over a class you have never met. Very often, you don't even know what the class have been doing or what you're supposed to teach.

If your school follows a loose syllabus and gives you plenty of time for extracurricular activities, you might have the chance to organise a free conversation lesson. If, instead, your school expects you to follow a strict long-term plan, you cannot really afford to waste time and need to find out where your colleague left off with the class. This latter case is a bit tricky to handle, since asking students about their last lesson might give the impression that you are unprepared, or that the teachers in your school aren't well coordinated. So you need to be a little sly about it. How can you save face? Give your students a quick task and, while they're working on it, walk around the room and glance at the books and notebooks of a few students. This way, you'll see roughly where they are in the syllabus and what the next untouched topic might be. Any remaining gaps can be covered by the absent teacher once they're back.

For both scenarios — a whole conversation lesson or simply buying some time — the following conversation task can be genuinely entertaining, engaging and useful.

Lead-in

Depending on the level, you might recap family vocabulary (A2), expressions for (dis)agreeing (B1), the language of negotiation (B2), or language for expressing intense feelings such as anger, astonishment or happiness (C1). You can also ask students to discuss in pairs or small groups whether they have a rich aunt or uncle, whether they've ever inherited anything (clarifying the meaning of 'inherit' and related words or synonyms, such as 'left behind', 'inheritance' vs 'heritage'), or whether they know anyone who got rich thanks to an inheritance, and so on.

Ask students to get into groups of 2/3/4 and move to different corners of the room, so as not to disturb one another.

Main part

Introduce your students to the following situation:

"You are cousins and have a very old and rich aunty, Emma. Aunty Emma has been in a coma for more than a week, and there is little chance that she will wake up. She never wrote a will, but asked her nieces and nephews to decide together who gets what. The following things need to be divided up:

- *a castle in Scotland*
- *a hotel in London*
- *a casino in Las Vegas*
- *a library of ancient books*
- *2 Rembrandts*
- *jewels worth €500,000*
- *a Harley Davidson*
- *2 cats and a parrot*



Aunty Emma set the following rules:

- *her nieces and nephews cannot sell or give anything away;*
- *they cannot split up items (e.g. the books in the library);*
- *they must explain why they deserve what they're asking for;*
- *if they cannot agree on how to divide the goods, everything will go to charity.*

You have 10 minutes to negotiate."

Give students some time to prepare for the meeting with their cousins. Ask them to write down what they'd like to have and to think of reasons why they should get it.

You can also help your students with some useful expressions for negotiating and expressing (dis)agreement, such as:

- *True, but I think...*
- *I absolutely agree with you.*
- *I'm not sure I agree with that.*
- *I don't agree at all.*
- *Well, I completely disagree.*
- *I can accept this.*

And useful language for interrupting and responding to interruptions, such as:

- *Sorry for interrupting.*
- *Let me finish, please.*
- *What I was saying is...*
- *Hold on a second...*
- *Can I add something here?*

After some preparation time, start the clock.

Students' practice

While students are discussing, monitor them and make sure they don't simply agree to each other's requests, but actually negotiate — and share anecdotes about the items too (e.g. "When I was a young boy, Auntie Emma took me out for a ride on her motorbike every Sunday, so I'd like to have the Harley Davidson").

Feedback

After 10 minutes, ask each group to choose a spokesperson to present their final compromise (if they haven't reached one, they forfeit the right to anything). Give them feedback on both content and language.

Follow-up

You can then tell students the following story:

"It turns out that Auntie Emma secretly got married about 20 years ago, but her husband, Uncle Harry, has since passed away. His family also has the right to inherit something."

Put two of the previous groups together (having them move closer to one another) and point to one of the groups:

"They are the nieces and nephews of the late husband. Now discuss again who gets what, and why. You have 7 minutes to do this."

Monitor your students, and after 7 minutes, ask for feedback. The notes you took while monitoring can be a good way to identify which language points to revise in the remaining part of the lesson.

Nota bene

I found this exercise in a German course book, *em Brückenkurs* (Hueber Verlag), featuring Tante Erna, and have used it with very different levels and groups of students many times over the past 15 years (in both German and English). On every occasion, it was great fun. This exercise also helps you understand group dynamics (which students work well together, which ones don't get along, etc.) — something particularly useful if you're unfamiliar with the class.