GoTeach

20 Short ESL Speaking Activities for Adult Learners

10–20 minute speaking breaks with a real communicative goal · CEFR A2–C1 · pairs and small groups

Run any of these in the middle of a lesson. Set the goal, time it, and note errors as you listen: correct them together after the activity, not during it.

11 Apartment Dilemma

B1+ · 15 min

Prep: Two apartment listings, one per learner

1. Pairs are friends looking for a new apartment. Give each learner a different listing and different priorities (one needs a quiet place to work, the other wants to be near nightlife; budgets differ).
2. Without showing their listings, partners describe the apartments and explain what they need.
3. They must agree on one apartment and tell the class why.

Watch out: Never give both listings to both learners. The information gap is what makes them talk.

12 The Birthday Party

A2–B1 · 15 min

Prep: None

1. Groups of 3 plan a birthday party for a friend.
2. Each learner gets a secret constraint: one is on a strict budget, one is vegetarian, one hates loud music.
3. Give 10 minutes to plan, then each group presents its plan to the class.

Watch out: If the conversation dies, make the constraints stricter. The birthday person is afraid of balloons.

13 Story Chain

A2+ · 12 min

Prep: None

1. Groups of 4. The first learner starts the story: "Once upon a time..."
2. Each learner adds one sentence that continues from the last one and uses the grammar target (for example the past simple, or because).
3. Run 3–4 rounds, then one learner per group retells the whole story.

Watch out: Without a grammar target it's a game, not a lesson.

14 Hotel Complaint

B1+ · 15 min

Prep: Role cards: one guest, one receptionist

1. The guest has 5 complaints about the stay: no hot water, a noisy room, dirty towels, a wrong charge, a lost reservation.
2. The receptionist must resolve at least 3 of them to the guest's satisfaction.
3. Take notes for delayed error correction, then swap roles.

Watch out: The 3-of-5 rule forces a trade-off. "Sorry, I'll fix it" to everything is not a negotiation.

15 Picture Differences

A2–B1 · 12 min

Prep: Two similar but not identical pictures

1. Pairs sit back to back with one picture each.
2. Without showing their pictures, they describe them and find 8–10 differences.
3. They swap pictures and compare: did you describe the same thing in different words?

Watch out: The follow-up in step 3 is where the vocabulary work happens.

16 Job Interview: The Bad One

B1+ · 18 min

Prep: A job ad and a deliberately weak CV

1. One learner is the interviewer. The candidate has a weak CV for the job (gaps, irrelevant experience).
2. The interviewer has 10 minutes to find out three things about the candidate.
3. Switch roles with a new CV.

Watch out: Focus on how the interviewer asks difficult questions: soft openers, follow-ups, "Tell me more about that gap."

17 Travel Agency

B1 · 15 min

Prep: Two role cards with different preferences

1. One learner is a travel agent with 3 possible packages, none of them a perfect match.
2. The customer has limits: under $1,500, no red-eye flights, must include a weekend.
3. They negotiate until they agree on a trip.

Watch out: Don't pre-teach travel vocabulary. If they need a word, answer in English and move on.

18 News Report

B2+ · 15 min

Prep: A short news article (one paragraph)

1. Pairs read the same short article.
2. Student A closes it. Student B has 60 seconds to summarize it, then A asks 3 follow-up questions.
3. Swap roles with a new article.

Watch out: Push for a summary in their own words, not word-for-word recall.

19 The Untranslatable Word

B1+ · 12 min

Prep: None

1. Each learner thinks of a word in their first language with no direct English translation (saudade, hygge...).
2. They explain its meaning to a partner in English without saying the word.
3. The class tries to coin an English equivalent for each word.

Watch out: Leave time for the discussion: which ideas does English have no word for, and why?

20 Telephone Message

A2–B1 · 12 min

Prep: A written message with 5–6 details

1. Student A reads a short phone message aloud (name, callback number, time...).
2. Student B listens once and writes down what they remember. Read it once more.
3. Compare B's notes with the original message.

Watch out: Don't let them paraphrase. Drill the numbers and names, which people miss on real calls.

21 Debate: Light Version

B2 · 18 min

Prep: One simple statement ("phones should be banned in class")

1. Split the class in two. Each side has 3 minutes to prepare 3 arguments.
2. Run a 4-minute structured debate: alternating 30-second turns, no interruptions.
3. Finish with a 1-minute reflection: which argument changed your mind?

Watch out: Time it strictly, or the strongest learners talk 80% of the time.

22 Survey Says

A2+ · 15 min

Prep: A short survey with 6–8 questions

1. Learners walk around and ask each other the survey questions ("How many hours did you sleep last night?").
2. Each learner surveys 5 classmates.
3. They report the class results: "Most people in this class sleep 6 hours a night."

Watch out: The reporting stage is the lesson. Push most, a few, half, three out of five.

23 Lost in Translation

B1+ · 12 min

Prep: 6 short English idioms

1. Pairs guess the meaning of 6 idioms (break a leg, under the weather, piece of cake...) with no dictionaries.
2. Check the meanings together as a class.
3. Each pair invents a short story that uses all 6 idioms.

Watch out: Don't pre-teach the idioms. The guessing is the activity.

24 The Doctor's Office

B1 · 15 min

Prep: Role cards with symptoms and follow-up questions

1. One learner is a patient with a set of symptoms; the other is the doctor.
2. The doctor must ask at least 8 questions before giving a diagnosis (Have you been...? How long...? How often...?).
3. Swap roles with new symptom cards.

Watch out: Say clearly that this is not medical advice. You're practicing questions.

25 Mashed-Up Movie Pitch

B2+ · 18 min

Prep: A list of 10 random elements (settings, characters, objects)

1. Groups of 3 draw 5 random elements (a librarian, a thunderstorm, a missing cat...).
2. They have 10 minutes to invent a movie that uses all 5.
3. Each group pitches its movie to the class in 90 seconds.

Watch out: Let them be funny. Save corrections for after the pitches.

26 Email to the Boss

B1+ · 15 min

Prep: A short scenario (late, a day off, a mistake)

1. Student A dictates an email to their boss; Student B writes it down.
2. They read the email aloud together to check it.
3. Swap scenarios. Give delayed feedback at the end.

Watch out: Don't correct while they dictate. Speaking clearly enough to be written down is the skill.

27 The Wrong Recipe

A2 · 12 min

Prep: A simple recipe with 3 deliberate mistakes

1. Student A reads a recipe aloud.
2. Student B follows along (no ingredients in front of them) and must catch the 3 wrong steps.
3. Switch roles with a second recipe.

Watch out: Listen for the small connecting words: preheat, then, after that, while.

28 Compare and Contrast

B1+ | 15 min

Prep: Two photos of two cities, restaurants or homes

1. Pairs look at the two photos together.
2. Each learner gives a 60-second spoken comparison.
3. Use the frame: what's the same, what's different, which would you prefer, and why.

Watch out: B1 learners run out of language fast. Put the frame on the board before they start.

29 The Conspiracy Theory

C1 | 15 min

Prep: A real, harmless, weird-but-true fact

1. Give pairs the weird fact.
2. They have 5 minutes to invent a conspiracy theory that explains it, using hedging (it could be that, allegedly).
3. Pairs present; the class votes for the most plausible theory.

Watch out: Avoid anything political or medical, or anything that touches a student's culture.

30 Mystery Phone Call

B1+ | 15 min

Prep: Role cards

1. Student B secretly takes a role: an old friend, a debt collector, a wrong number with a problem, or a new boss.
2. B calls Student A, who doesn't know who is calling.
3. A has 5 minutes to work out who B is by asking open questions.

Watch out: Don't pre-teach the questions. Let them emerge, then review them together.

Want a full lesson around one of these? Describe the activity in the free lesson plan generator and get a reading, vocabulary, exercises and an answer key: **goteach.io/free-lesson-plan-generator**