



USING FISHBOWL METHOD IN ENGLISH LESSONS AS FOREIGN LANGUAGE

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Annotation

The article discusses the use of the fishbowl method in English lessons. The stages of application, advantages and disadvantages are explained.

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A fishbowl conversation is a form of dialog that can be used when discussing topics within large groups. Fishbowl conversations are sometimes also used in participatory events such as unconferences. The advantage of fishbowl is that it allows the entire group to participate in a conversation. Several people can join the discussion.

Four to five chairs are arranged in an inner circle. This is the fishbowl. The remaining chairs are arranged in concentric circles outside the fishbowl. A few participants are selected to fill the fishbowl, while the rest of the group sit on the chairs outside the fishbowl. In an open fishbowl, one chair is left empty. In a closed fishbowl, all chairs are filled. The moderator introduces the topic and the participants start discussing the topic. The audience outside the fishbowl listen in on the discussion.

In an open fishbowl, any member of the audience can, at any time, occupy the empty chair and join the fishbowl. When this happens, an existing member of the fishbowl must voluntarily leave the fishbowl and free a chair. The discussion continues with participants frequently entering and leaving the fishbowl. Depending on how large your audience is you can have many audience members spend some time in the fishbowl and take part in the discussion. When time runs out, the fishbowl is closed and the moderator summarizes the discussion.

An immediate variation of this is to have only two chairs in the central group. When someone in the audience wants to join the two-way conversation, they come forward and tap the shoulder of the person they want to replace, at some point when they are not talking. The tapped speaker must then return to the outer circles, being replaced by the new speaker, who carries on the conversation in their place.



In a closed fishbowl, the initial participants speak for some time. When time runs out, they leave the fishbowl and a new group from the audience enters the fishbowl. This continues until many audience members have spent some time in the fishbowl. Once the final group has concluded, the moderator closes the fishbowl and summarizes the discussion.

Procedure

1. Select a Topic

Almost any topic is suitable for a Fishbowl discussion. The most effective prompts (questions or texts) do not have one right answer or interpretation, but rather allow for multiple perspectives and opinions. The Fishbowl strategy is excellent for discussing dilemmas, for example.

2. Set Up the Room

A Fishbowl discussion requires a circle of chairs (“the fishbowl”) and enough room around the circle for the remaining students to observe what is happening in the “fishbowl.” Sometimes teachers place enough chairs for half of the students in the class to sit in the fishbowl, while other times teachers limit the chairs further. Typically, six to 12 chairs allows for a range of perspectives while still giving each student an opportunity to speak. The observing students often stand around the fishbowl.

3. Prepare for the Discussion

Like many structured conversations, Fishbowl discussions are most effective when students have had a few minutes to prepare ideas and questions in advance.

4. Discuss Norms and Rules

There are many ways to structure a Fishbowl discussion. Sometimes teachers have half the class sit in the fishbowl for ten to 15 minutes before announcing “Switch,” at which point the listeners enter the fishbowl and the speakers become the audience. Another common Fishbowl discussion format is the “tap” system, where students on the outside of the fishbowl gently tap a student on the inside, indicating that they should switch roles. See the variations section below for more ideas about how to structure this activity.

Regardless of the particular rules you establish, make sure they are explained to students beforehand. You also want to provide instructions for the students in the audience. What should they be listening for? Should they be taking notes? Before beginning the Fishbowl activity, you may wish to review guidelines for having a respectful conversation. Sometimes teachers ask audience members to pay



attention to how these norms are followed by recording specific aspects of the discussion process, such as the number of interruptions, examples of respectful or disrespectful language being used, or speaking times (who is speaking the most or the least).

5. Debrief

After the discussion, you can ask students to reflect on how they think the discussion went and what they learned from it. Students can also evaluate their performance as listeners and as participants. They could also provide suggestions for how to improve the quality of discussion in the future. These reflections can be in writing, or they can be structured as a small- or large-group conversation.

Advantages

An advantage of a fishbowl conversation is that it is suitable for large groups. It also lessens distinctions between the speakers and the audience. This has made fishbowls popular in participatory group meetings and conferences.

Issues

This is not a forum where introverted or shy people will be inclined to contribute. To include them, it is possible to break the dialog down into much smaller groups to make them feel comfortable to discuss a topic. Their opinions can be garnered upfront through a post-it gathering exercise or with live-voting on whose opinion they value/want replaced (via non-technical show of arms/clapping or a digital live-voting app).

Variations

The group can be split into two smaller and distinct sub-groups (such as men and women, or older and younger participants), who convene separately and come up with three to four questions for the other group, which are written on cards. The participants reconvene, exchange cards, and form two circles with one subgroup inside the other and both of them facing inwards. The inside group read a question and discuss it, while those in the outside circle listen but do not speak. Each question is discussed in this way, making sure everyone in the inner circle has a chance to speak. The circles are then reversed. The questions that the groups generate can be on the same subject or not, at the discretion of the organizer. This version is a good party game for groups of thirty to sixty people.

Another derivative is to have the fishbowl run for a certain period of time - e.g., half an hour. The moderator stops the discussion in the fishbowl circle and invites those not in the inner circle to offer their thoughts and comments on what they are hearing in the inner circle.

Another variation is to use technology, such as CoverItLive, to increase participation. This allows all the participants in the Outer Circle the opportunity to share their thinking in the public online forum without needing to wait turns. The online forum is also projected in the room for the Inner Circle to use as additional talking points or building ideas from. This variation allows for an environment that supports extroverts and introverts. (Extroverts - speaking in front of the group, Introverts - sharing their thinking in the online public forum). In this variation, a hot seat (or open seat) is also available for Outer Circle participants so they can at any time join the Fishbowl (Inner Circle) and share their thinking verbally if needed.

A Fishbowl for Opposing Positions: This is a type of group discussion that can be utilized when there are two distinct positions or arguments. Each group has an opportunity to discuss the issue while the other group observes. The goal of this technique is for one group to gain insight about the other perspective by having this opportunity to listen and formulate questions. After both sides have shared and listened, students are often given the opportunity to discuss their questions and ideas with students who are representing the other side of the argument.

A Fishbowl for Multiple Perspectives: This format allows students to look at a question or a text from various perspectives. First, assign perspectives to groups of students. These perspectives could represent the viewpoints of different historical figures, characters in a novel, social categories (e.g., young, old, male, female, working-class laborer, industrialist, peasant, noble, soldier, priest), or political/philosophical points of view. Each group discusses the same question, event, or text, representing the assigned perspective. The goal of this technique is for students to consider how perspective shapes meaning-making. After all groups have shared, students can be given the opportunity to discuss their ideas and questions with peers from other groups.



Conclusion

In a Fishbowl discussion, students seated inside the “fishbowl” actively participate in a discussion by asking questions and sharing their opinions, while students standing outside listen carefully to the ideas presented. Students take turns in these roles, so that they practice being both contributors and listeners in a group discussion. This strategy is especially useful when you want to make sure all students participate in a discussion, when you want to help students reflect on what a good discussion looks like, and when you need a structure for discussing controversial or difficult topics. A Fishbowl discussion makes for an excellent pre-writing activity, often unearthing questions or ideas that students can explore more deeply in an independent assignment.

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