

# **The words about us**

**- a collection of classroom activities to help teachers use the language of the environment**

**By**  
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**Dedicated to the teachers and pupils of  
Loving Hearts Primary School, Bunyonyi, Uganda  
and  
Tujereng Lower Basic School, Tujereng, The Gambia**

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

This collection of activities was originally shared with teachers at the Africa TESOL Conference, Dakar, in 2018. Language taken from the learners' environment is used in the activities, rather than from coursebooks or other abstract sources, consequently the benefits are multiple! By using this language, class content becomes more authentic and relevant to the learners' lives, and less teacher or school centred. Relying on real life demonstrations in a familiar and natural environment, they add a very practical approach to language input. Recognising that the language learnt is already used outside the classroom can help draw attention to how and why words are used and ultimately help learners memorise words and structures more easily.

These activities, several of which are directly inspired by Damian Williams' article and *Map of the Urban Linguistic Landscape* blog (<https://murbll.wordpress.com>), require little preparation.

The intention of this free booklet is to provide teachers with fresh and enjoyable activities that are quick to set up and easy to use. At the same time spreading the message of *Teachers for Schools* – we can do more! I hope you enjoy them as much as I have.

Happy teaching!

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*Tujereng, The Gambia*

## TEACHERS FOR SCHOOLS

We are an areligious and apolitical group of ELT (English Language Teaching) teachers in Germany, who have agreed to work together to see how we can support needy schools in developing nations on a grassroots level. With a 'little things make big differences' ethos, we began by visiting schools, initially in Uganda and the Gambia, to establish a working relationship with them.

Together we have been able to identify immediate needs and understand how we can make the learning environment comfortable and enjoyable for learners and teachers alike. From the beginning, we have been overwhelmed by the support received from colleagues and friends, who have helped us realise that such a project is possible. Our aim is to create a model that can be reused by other teachers and teaching associations wherever it is needed.

While the schools involved have shown their deep appreciation, we realise that there is much more to be done. If you are able to support us by donating materials, or making a donation to help with the shipping costs of teaching materials or to make essential classrooms repairs, you would be helping numerous children on the road to a better future.

To find out more, please see the account of my visit to Tujereng Lower Basic School in Tujereng, The Gambia at: <https://andralma.wordpress.com/>

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# Wordspotters

<b>Focus</b>	Making learners aware of the language of their environment, and collecting and grouping words
<b>Individual or group</b>	Either
<b>Level</b>	Beginner - Advanced
<b>Time</b>	30 minutes (with potential for further study/reflection)
<b>Preparation</b>	Collect examples of English from the immediate environment, this could be the slogans from clothing, advertising on food packets, billboards etc.

## In class

1. Show the class the examples of language from the environment that you have collected. This could be individual words or phrases.
2. Tell the class that you will all go for a walk through some nearby streets. When you do, you would like learners to write down any words that they spot. If they have mobile phones, ask them to photograph their examples.
3. Back in the classroom, ask the learners to work together in groups using the language that they collected. Remind them that in dictionaries, words are grouped according to the first letter of the word (A-Z), then ask the learners to think of other ways to group their words (these could be semantic fields such as colours or animals, or different word classes, adjectives, nouns etc.). Doing this will help them to think about how words are used, and as their vocabulary grows help them to use other words in similar structures.
4. Ask the groups to share what they have found with the rest of the class and explain how they grouped them. Encourage the learners to keep up their lists with any words they encounter in the future.

## Follow up

Low level learners could play a game of *I spy*, with each learner giving the first letter of a word that they have spotted. The others then try to guess what the word is.

In a high-level class, one of my learners spotted the slogan 'fear the poet and drink the whisky'. When he did, he tried to replace the nouns with other nouns. Encourage your learners to do the same with any slogans that they discover.



Magic Land Amusement Park,  
Dakar, Senegal

# A-Z

<b>Focus</b>	Creating new alphabet cards or a local picture dictionary
<b>Individual or group</b>	Either
<b>Level</b>	Beginner - Elementary
<b>Time</b>	60 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	Ask learners to collect English nouns from their streets or homes and bring them to class. These could be taken from advertising, food packages, magazines etc.

## In class

1. Tell learners that words in dictionaries are grouped according to the letter that they start with (e.g. a is for apple, b is for banana etc.). If you already have examples of alphabet cards or a picture dictionary, draw their attention to these.
2. Ask the learners to share the words that they have collected with the class. You may want to do this methodically by first collecting any words that start with 'a', then all the 'b' words etc.
3. Ask the class to create new alphabet cards (or a picture dictionary), by drawing pictures to illustrate the words that they have collected.

## Follow up

The reference images that the learners create will be a very personal and relevant record that they can continue to work with as they develop their reading and writing skills.

For elementary to intermediate learners, you could also ask them to create images for phonemes (ch, sh, ng, ow etc.)



*Tujereng Lower Basic School,  
Tujereng, The Gambia*

# Guess what

**Focus** Identifying the meanings of word in contexts

**Individual or group** Either

**Level** Intermediate - Advanced

**Time** 30 minutes (in class)

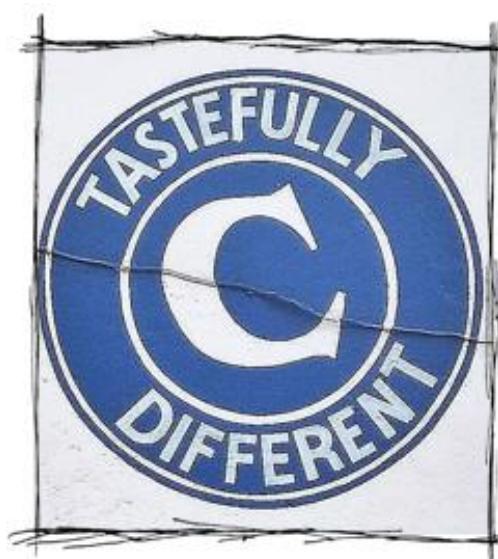
**Preparation** Ask learners to collect phrases from the streets of their town or city. It is important that they remember where they saw them and what the context was. If they have mobile phones they can take photographs to work with in class. Ask the learners to tell you what they've found before the class.

## In class

1. Divide the class into teams. Tell them that they will compete against each other to identify where the phrases have come from and what they refer to.
2. Each team takes a turn to write the phrase on the board. As the other teams try to guess the context, the team can give clues if they wish (e.g. where they were when they saw this, what they were doing etc.)
3. If a team guesses correctly, they score a point. If nobody can guess the context, the team who the phrase belongs to gains a point.
4. The winning team is the team that has the most points once all phrases have been shared.

## Follow up

Ask students to explain where there has been a clever play on words or a homophone/homonym has been used so that the phrase could be understood in different ways.



*Royal Beauty Salon, Mbarara, Uganda*

# Reverse role plays

<b>Focus</b>	Understanding how the context can change the meaning of the word(s) used
<b>Individual or group</b>	Group
<b>Level</b>	Intermediate - Advanced
<b>Time</b>	60 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	Collect phrases from the streets of your town or city. Write these on cue cards so that there is a different phrase for each group.

## In class

1. Divide the class up into groups of two or three learners. Tell each group that you will give them a phrase, and to discuss what they think the context is and what they think it refers to.
2. When they have decided, ask them to write a short conversation which includes the phrase given.
3. Once everyone has finished, ask each group to act out their conversations. As they do so the others should try to identify the phrase that they were given.
4. Ask the class where they think you saw the phrase and how it might be used in a different context to the way that it was used in the conversations.

## Follow up

Ask students to look for other phrases in their environment and consider ways they could include them in their writing. Alternatively, you could set an essay and ask them to include as many of the phrases they've collected somewhere within it.



*Head Teacher's Door  
Tujareng, The Gambia*

# Predictive texts

<b>Focus</b>	Recognising collocations, lexical chunks or how set phrases are used in a given text
<b>Individual or group</b>	Either
<b>Level</b>	Intermediate - Advanced
<b>Time</b>	30 minutes
<b>Preparation</b>	Find an example of a longer text, such as an instruction booklet or safety notice and underline any key collocations or chunks.

## In class

1. Give the class the title or heading of the text and ask the learners what they think it will tell them.
2. Tell the learners that you will either dictate or write the text on the board. As you do so, you will occasionally stop and ask them to contribute the next word or words. For example, in a text from a school's punishment policy, you might begin by reading the sentence *No student must undergo any form of...* then stop to ask the class what word(s) might come next. Learner contributions could be: *punishment; stress; treatment etc.*
3. Review the structures used and discuss how these might be adapted to suit similar texts that the learners might have to write in the future.

## Alternative task

By giving the learners the beginning of a text and an alternative title, you could recycle the structure to write a new text.



Brick Lane, London, UK



# Learner - Teacher

**Focus** Correcting errors and improving spelling and punctuation skills

**Individual or group** Either

**Level** Elementary - Advanced

**Time** 30 minutes

**Preparation** Collect some examples of the wording of public signs, shop windows or graffiti where there is an obvious mistake in spelling or punctuation. This could be a missing or out of place apostrophe or a badly spelt word. If you have difficulty finding examples, try searching for examples by entering 'bad English' or 'funny English signs' in Google images.

## In class

1. Divide the class into groups. Give each group one example of something that has been badly written.
2. Ask the groups to discuss any errors they see and why they think they may have happened. As soon as they are ready, pass on the examples to a new group and again give them time to discuss.
3. Once each group has seen each example, ask the class to share what errors they noticed.

## Follow up

Ask the class to compile a 'common mistakes' checklist to keep as a reminder to themselves when doing any written practice.



*Serrekunda, The Gambia*

# DIY linguistic environment

**Focus** Free writing to share important messages

**Individual or group** Either

**Level** Beginners - Advanced

**Time** 30 minutes (with potential for further study/reflection)

**Preparation** One piece of blank paper per student and an empty wall.

## In class

1. Ask the class what they think about graffiti. Where have they seen it and what examples can they give? Did they dislike what they saw, or did it make them think? Is it an art form or do they think it vandalism?
2. Tell the class that you will dedicate one wall of the school building to their messages. Tell them that many people will see this wall and that their message is important. Give them a sheet of paper and ask them to write their message on this. Give them time to think about what they will say.  
NB. If you have a spare wall that needs decorating, consider asking the learners to write directly on the wall.
3. Once everyone has added something, encourage the class to read each other's comments.

## Follow up

To generate class discussion, put up one blank sheet next to each comment. Ask the class to add their own thoughts about what it says. Collect these later and use them for a class debate.



*Tarifa, Spain*

# A new slogan

**Focus** Writing new slogans for a well-known product or service

**Individual or group** Either

**Level** Intermediate - Advanced

**Time** 30 minutes

**Preparation** Find or take a picture of a poster or advert that is familiar to your students. Remove or block any text so that only the images remain visible (you can do this using a marker pen or the *Microsoft Paint* programme) and make a copy for each student or group.

## In class

1. Divide the class into small groups of two or three. Give each group a copy of the poster.
2. Ask the class if they recognise the pictures. What do they know about the product or service? Have they used it? Who do they think it is trying to appeal to?
3. Tell the class that you would like to create a new slogan for this advert. Give them 15 to 20 minutes to discuss and come up with something new.
4. Ask each group to share their ideas and explain why they chose their words. You could ask the class to vote on the one they like best.

## Alternative task

Rather than blocking the text, find a poster in the learners' first language and ask them to come up with a suitable slogan in English.



*'Mess with your senses' - slogan removed*  
Kabale, Uganda

# Streetwise

**Focus** Using *street/place names for class projects*

**Individual or group** Either

**Level** Intermediate - Advanced

**Time** 10 minutes

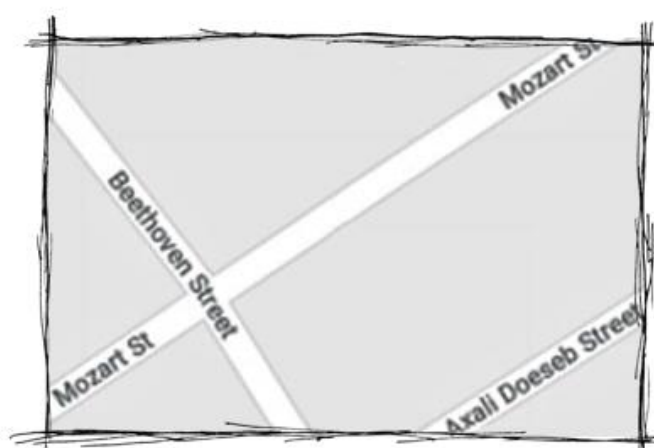
**Preparation** Collect some familiar names of local streets or places. You may want to give the students a map or an atlas, or (if available) ask them to use *Google Maps* for inspiration.

## In class

1. Ask the class to tell you the names of local streets, or the streets where they live, and write these on the board.
2. Ask the class if they know where the names of the streets come from. Are they famous people or places, or do they have a historical reference? If the learners are not sure, ask them to find out either by using an encyclopaedia or Wikipedia/Google.
3. Ask the class to prepare a poster or presentation about the name of their street.

## Alternative task

If local streets do not have a name, e.g. *6<sup>th</sup> Avenue*, *F Road* etc. ask learners to look up the names of streets in their capital cities, or places that they might read about.



Windhoek, Namibia

# Namesakes

**Focus** Learning about places that share the same name as the learners

**Individual or group** Either

**Level** Intermediate - Advanced

**Time** 30 minutes ((with potential for further study/reflection)

**Preparation** Most common first names are also the names of places on this or other worlds: *Mousa* is one of the Shetland Islands, *Ammar* and *Sarah* are villages in Iran, and *Pascal* is a crater on the Moon. Check to make sure that the names of all students in your class can be found in an atlas, on *Google Maps* or are listed on Wikipedia as place names.

## In class

1. Ask the learners what they know about their names. How did they get them, what do they mean and can they name any famous people that share the same name?
2. Tell the class that they share their names with a place, this could be a city, village, geographical feature or celestial body. Ask them to find out where and to collect some details about this place.
3. Ask the learners to do further research and try to find out why the place has their name.
4. Ask them to present their findings in a poster or class presentation.

## Alternative task

If you have difficulty finding names, give the class some names of famous places (i.e. Port Harcourt, Alexandria, Mozambique) and find out who the people were that gave their names to them.



*Andreas, Isle of Man*



**Little things make big differences**