



Starting a conversation

Skills and curriculum references

Sc/E2.1a	Use stress and intonation adequately to make speech comprehensible and meaning understood
Sd/E2.1a	Take part in social interaction
Lr/E2.6b	Take part in social interaction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> recognise speaker's mood and attitude, expressed through intonation
Lr/E3.6b	Listen to and respond appropriately to other points of view

Topic/function

Learners practise opening a conversation using question tags to gauge the level of willingness to respond in others, focusing on the weather.

Rationale

A large part of social interaction concerns recognising spoken and unspoken clues. Question tags, which are 'unreal' questions from which the speaker anticipates a certain response, play a role in this. Learners need to distinguish between a guest asking a real question and a guest using a question tag in order to start a conversation. They must also be able to express themselves properly using this technique.

English language learners who come to work in Britain are often surprised at how changeable the weather is and just how much conversation revolves around the climate. They are often unfamiliar with the variety of words used to describe the day-to-day conditions.

Grammar focus

This unit practises the use of question tags.

A positive verb takes a negative tag, for example:

- 'It's a lovely day, **isn't** it?'

A negative verb takes a positive tag, for example:

- 'It **isn't** very warm, **is** it?'

The same auxiliary verb should be used in the tag as in the main clause, for example:

- 'He **can** stay tomorrow, **can't** he?'
- 'They **won't be** having dinner tonight, **will** they?'
- 'You **haven't** stayed here before, **have** you?'

If there is no auxiliary verb, the appropriate form of 'do' should be used, for example:

- 'He leaves tomorrow, **doesn't** he?'
- 'That looks nice, **doesn't** it?'

List of materials

The following materials accompany this unit:

- Photocopiable learner's materials – pages 3.4–3.8.

The following materials would also be useful with this unit:

- Weather pictures
- Items of clothing and other realia, for example a scarf, a pair of sunglasses, a pair of gloves, a woolly hat, an umbrella, a camera or picnic bag.

Sequence of activities

Introduction

- 1 Use any preferred pictures or items of clothing as prompts to check that learners know the common weather words and phrases. Ensure that learners feel confident with the positive, negative and question forms. Distribute copies of sheet A to learners. Look at the sentences given and work through the examples and the rules together.

Practice exercise

- 2 This exercise teaches the correct intonation to use with tag questions. You could record the questions below onto tape or read them out yourself. Distribute copies of sheet B to learners. Learners should listen to the sentences and complete exercise 1. Work through the sentences together and practise the correct intonation. Give learners a copy of the sentences so that they can check the correct answers to this exercise. Learners could go on to try opening a conversation using a sentence about the weather. You could then reply in a bored voice to illustrate the importance of intonation and to illustrate when a person loses interest.

- 'It's nice enough to sit on the terrace, isn't it?'
- 'It's too wet to go out today, isn't it?'
- 'It was very hot yesterday, wasn't it?'
- 'The weather's awful, isn't it?'
- 'It was very cold yesterday, wasn't it?'
- 'It's a bit chilly today, isn't it?'
- 'It looks as if it's going to rain, doesn't it?'
- 'It poured with rain last week, didn't it?'

- 3 Cut up copies of the game cards from sheet D and distribute to learners. They should use the cards to undertake a matching and speaking exercise in pairs. Make sure that the learners' intonation is accurate (with a falling tone for the tag). The repetitive nature of the exercise ensures that learners feel happy about which tag to use.

Continuing conversations

- 4 Distribute copies of sheet C to learners and cut up copies of the game cards on sheet E. Ask them to complete exercises 2 and 3 in pairs, using the games cards as a prompt. They should also complete missing tags and match the sentences. Each partner should expect the other to agree with them and to continue the conversation, for example:

- 'It's a nice day, isn't it?' – 'Yes, but still a bit chilly.'

Using the game cards or realia as prompts, encourage learners to use as many different weather words as possible. If learners are struggling to produce sentences, give each one an item of clothing or an accessory as a prompt: for example a scarf, a pair of sunglasses, a pair of gloves, a woolly hat, an umbrella, a camera or a picnic bag.

Extension and differentiation

Learners often need to extend their vocabulary so that they can refine their descriptions of weather. More-able learners can make a list of different words (mild, damp or chilly) and grade them accordingly. Try putting these learners into pairs and set a time limit for the longest list, for example:

- It's warm/hot/very hot/sweltering/baking/boiling.
- It's mild/cool/chilly/damp/cold/very cold/frosty/freezing/icy/snowing.
- It's spitting/just a shower/drizzling/raining hard/pouring.
- It's cloudy/clouding over/clearing up.

Encourage use of more descriptive words like 'changeable' and 'unsettled'. For less-able learners, taking one season at a time can often be useful.

Weather idioms are also always popular with learners:

- 'Make hay while the sun shines.'
- 'It's just a storm in a teacup.'
- 'He's a bit under the weather.'
- 'It's raining cats and dogs.'
- 'She's like a breath of fresh air.'
- 'It never rains but it pours.'

Many languages have similar idioms and learners enjoy exchanging information.

Try introducing and continuing other topics using question tags, for example appearance, mood, health or personal information:

- 'You haven't been here before, have you?'
- 'You know about the festival, don't you?'
- 'The little girl is tired, isn't she?'
- 'The view from there is lovely, isn't it?'



Starting a conversation

Name _____

Talking about the weather and using tags is a very friendly way to start a conversation. If you reply using just 'yes' or 'no', the conversation may stop. Tags are mini-questions. By using a tag, you sound friendly and the conversation continues. This is because you show that you are expecting the listener to agree with you and continue the conversation.

Examples of **positive sentences** with **negative tags**:

- **It's** a lovely day, **isn't it?** – Yes **it is, isn't it?**
- **It was** much cooler yesterday, **wasn't it?** – Yes **it was, wasn't it?**

Examples of **negative sentences** with **positive tags**:

- **It's not** very warm today, **is it?** – No, **it isn't, is it?**
- **It wasn't** very nice yesterday, **was it?** – No, **it wasn't, was it?**

Always use the same **auxiliary tag** as in the main sentence. If there is no auxiliary, use '**do**'/'**does**' for present simple sentences and '**did**' for past simple sentences, for example:

- It looks as if it's going to rain, **doesn't it?** – Yes, it **does, doesn't it?**
- It poured with rain last week, **didn't it?** – Yes, it **did, didn't it?**



Starting a conversation

Name _____

Exercise 1

Listen to the sentences and fill in the missing tags.

- 1 'It's nice enough to sit on the terrace, _____ ?'
- 2 'It's too wet to go out today, _____ ?'
- 3 'It was very hot yesterday, _____ ?'
- 4 'The weather's awful, _____ ?'
- 5 'It was very cold yesterday, _____ ?'
- 6 'It's a bit chilly today, _____ ?'
- 7 'It looks as if it's going to rain, _____ ?'
- 8 'It poured with rain last week, _____ ?'

You can continue the conversation by agreeing with the statement, for example:

- 'It's a lovely day for sightseeing, isn't it?' – 'Yes, beautiful, isn't it?'



Starting a conversation

Name _____

Exercise 2

Practise the sentences from exercise 1 again by agreeing and adding the comments in the box below:

Yes, really lovely, isn't it?

Yes, it's a pity, isn't it?

Yes, too hot, wasn't it?

Yes, miserable, isn't it?

Yes, freezing, wasn't it?

Yes, but the weather is definitely improving, isn't it?

Yes, it does, but I think it will only be a shower.

Yes, but it's a bit better this week.

Listen to people using tags in everyday conversations. You'll be surprised at just how often they are used. Practise using them whenever you can.

Exercise 3

With a partner, use tags to talk about good weather, for example:

- 'This weather's wonderful, isn't it?'
 - 'Yes, I love the hot weather, don't you?'

Make more sentences using the words 'marvellous' and 'lovely'.

Use the same sentence to practise talking about bad weather, for example:

- 'This weather's awful, isn't it?'
 - 'Yes, I hope it changes soon, don't you?'

Make more sentences using the words 'miserable' and 'terrible'.



Starting a conversation

Game cards



It's nice enough to sit on
the terrace, isn't it?

Yes, it is, isn't it?

It's too wet to go out
today, isn't it?

Yes, it is, isn't it?

It was very warm
yesterday, wasn't it?

Yes, it was, wasn't it?

It wasn't very nice
yesterday, was it?

No, it wasn't, was it?

It looks as if it's going to
rain, doesn't it?

Yes, it does, doesn't it?

It poured with rain all last
week, didn't it?

Yes, it did, didn't it?



Starting a conversation

Game cards



It's nice enough to sit on the terrace _____ ?	Yes, really lovely, isn't it?
It's too wet to go out today, _____ ?	Yes, it's a pity, isn't it?
It was very hot yesterday, _____ ?	Yes, too hot, wasn't it?
The weather's awful, _____ ?	Yes, miserable, isn't it?
It was a very cold day yesterday, _____ ?	Yes, freezing, wasn't it?
It's a bit chilly today, _____ ?	Yes, but the weather's definitely improving, isn't it?
It looks as if it's going to rain, _____ ?	Yes, it does, but I think it will only be a shower.
It poured with rain last week, _____ ?	Yes, but it's a bit better this week.