

## **Parsnips in ELT: Stepping out of the comfort zone (Vol. 1)**

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Check out the blog designed by Mike JC Smith at:

<http://imagearies.com/wp-parsnips/>

## Foreword

Parsnips, it would seem, are full of surprises.

Did you know, for instance, that their unique flavour comes when the starches change to sugar? Indeed, for centuries before sugar was widely available in Europe, parsnips were actually used to sweeten jams and cakes.

Lots of mythology and false beliefs surround this fascinating vegetable. People used to believe that eating parsnips would relieve a whole variety of ailments, from toothache right through to tired feet. Despite this, they are a good source of nutrition when consumed in moderation, providing those who eat them with a healthy dose of vitamin C, folate and manganese.

Be wary, however; appearances can be deceptive! While it's not related to the "cow parsnip," which is a member of the parsley family, it's no coincidence that the parsnip resembles the carrot: these two vegetables are close relatives. What's more, those avid gardeners among you may wish to cultivate the parsnip with extreme caution. This is an aggressive vegetable, which, when planted, can negatively affect how other things, notably berries, grow in your gardens.

To those of us who garden in the classroom, trying to help our learners grow and flourish, the parsnip has another meaning and provides an emotive acronym for Politics, Alcohol, Religion, Sex, Narcotics, Isms and Pork – which can add sauce to any lesson. Just as the root vegetable contains properties that sweeten up things when added, so might the introduction of the odd controversial PARSNIP topic add something desirable to the mix in the language classroom. Similarly, not all that is believed about the PARSNIP list is necessarily true. The list has been around a while, times have changed, the world has become more homogenized and the topics therein may not be as controversial or untouchable as they once seemed.

Nevertheless, be wary of appearances: these topics still aren't simply ones that you can introduce on a whim. As with the cook wanting to improve the flavour of their cooking, the odd parsnip might just liven things up in the way you want. Heed the gardeners' warning and think carefully, though: a carefully cultivated classroom environment can be disrupted and even ruined by poor PARSNIP use.

We hope you enjoy the lessons contained in this first volume of PARSNIP lessons; the intention is to give you a selection of plans that will add to the class, so think about

their suitability and breach the idea of using these subjects with the people who will be most affected by them: your learners.

## The Parsnipers

Mike JC Smith (Australia) was in the RAAF for 16 years and moved into ESL/TESOL in 2001 focussing on aspects such as the impact of self-confidence and the concepts of accuracy and fluency. With a background in maths, science, engineering and web technology, he mainly teaches English for academic, professional and vocational purposes. [www.mikesmithteacher.com](http://www.mikesmithteacher.com)

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Adam Simpson (Turkey) has been teaching in Istanbul for 15 years. His interests include Dogme ELT and 'descriptive' rather than 'prescriptive' curriculum design. He often forces his opinions on others at conferences and through his unfathomably popular blog: <http://www.teachthemenglish.com/> .

Katherine Bilsborough (Spain) is a freelance ELT author. She doesn't have her own Blog or Website but she makes a habit of hijacking the Blogs of others. She co-curates the Free and Fair ELT page on Facebook. She can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/katherine.bilsborough> .

Noreen Lam (Spain) is always looking to expand her horizons within the ELT world, and is currently juggling university, in-company, YL teaching and whatever writing and editing opportunities come her way. She tries to encourage discussion and share resources with language learners at [www.facebook.com/EnglishWithNoreen](http://www.facebook.com/EnglishWithNoreen) .

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including Graphics, Web Design and Illustration. She is interested in all aspects of design in ICT and particularly enjoys creating book covers. She can be found at: <https://www.facebook.com/kati.bilsborough> .

## **PARSNIPS – A sampler menu**

### Politics by Mike

Students first look at some internet memes and identify some basic vocabulary related to a true political news story. They then brainstorm a list of things that politicians typically do to annoy the public. Students continue in groups by speculating on the story behind the memes and sharing their ideas. Finally, they are given the background information to the story so they can compare it with their own hypotheses. The lesson finishes with a writing task in which students give their opinions about politicians.

### Alcohol by Ceci

This lesson starts by asking learners to identify the same missing word (drink) from some common expressions. Students then think of situations when they would use these expressions. They continue by working in groups to share information about their own drinking habits and then in pairs to think of advantages and disadvantages of drinking. Students come up with a class list of pros and cons and finally choose the strongest argument for or against drinking and justify their choice.

### Religion by David

The teacher elicits a range of beliefs from the students and gives the opportunity for some of these to be removed from the following debate. The students then prepare reasons to believe in the ideas (or not to believe) and then conduct an opposition debate, discussing each belief as described and acting as a devil's advocate towards each other. The lesson ends with feedback on the content of the debate, feedback on the emotional reactions it provoked and on the language used.

### Sex by Adam

This lesson starts with a set of verifiable facts on the issue of homosexuality, before raising the notion of homophobia by presenting a series of scenarios that display varying degrees of prejudice. Learners finish off by debating their personal feelings and what they perceive as their cultural norms on homosexuality through a series of statements.

### Narcotics by Katherine

Students' knowledge about one of the most common recreational drugs, Cannabis, is elicited. It then provides an opportunity to find out facts about Cannabis and other common drugs. Students can access this information on their mobile phones if preferred. Students finish by writing fact files, sharing information and sharing their opinions in an informal discussion.

#### Isms by Noreen

The first activity looks at symbolism of sensitive periods in history, and leads to something recent that many students will have heard about. It addresses racism, freedoms and rights and gets students to think about how identification with a certain group can lead to conflicts.

#### Pork by Phil

This lesson finds out which food students like and don't like and uses that to move into the reasons behind why people do or don't eat meat. It then introduces an anecdote and examples of very culturally-based local specialities. Students roleplay and next reflect upon the effects of accepting and rejecting them.

## Politics – Mike

Aims: 1) To use speculative language. 2) To make simple sentences to discuss an aspect of politics.

Level: B2

Procedure

- 1) Show a collection of internet memes. These examples pertain to a political incident (<http://www.news.com.au/national/politics/internet-skewers-bronwyn-bishop-over-choppergate-scandal/story-fns0jze1-1227449706424>) in Australia.
- 2) Ask students to identify basic vocabulary (helicopter, dog, house, shark, etc.).
- 3) Explain to students that the pictures are a response to something a politician did recently which made the public very angry. N.B. Familiarise yourself with the background story (see link above).
- 4) Students work in groups to speculate on what the politician did.
- 5) It might be useful to get students to first brainstorm a list of things that politicians do which typically annoy the public. You can put keywords on the board.
- 6) Groups nominate scribes to summarise the group hypotheses, and then ambassadors to report to and share with other groups.
- 7) Provide the background information about the news story. Give groups time to compare this with their own hypotheses.
- 8) Finally, each student can write an individual short piece of writing on the following topic (or similar): Many people believe politicians are “out of touch” with the general public, while others maintain that politicians should be given special privileges. What is your view?

Notes

Provide as much or as little support as needed depending on the class level. You may also provide the framework target language at the beginning to prompt accuracy and get the activity started. As the task progresses, the target language may be removed from the whiteboard.

Target language

He/she/they might have (done something).

I wonder if / Perhaps / Maybe he/she/they (did something).



What do you think?

Do you agree?

I'm not really sure but ...

(I think) you might be right about that.

## Alcohol – Ceci

Aims: 1) To help students reflect on possible benefits and risks of alcohol drinking. 2) To teach idioms and expressions related to drinking. 3) To have students understand their use and meaning.

Level: B1-C1

### Procedure

- 1) To introduce the topic, write the following expressions on the board with a word missing. Tell students that the missing word is the same in each case ('drink'). Put students into pairs / small groups to share their opinions and guess the missing word. The definitions of the expressions are in parentheses:  
\_\_\_\_\_ someone under the table (to be able to drink more alcohol than someone else)  
\_\_\_\_\_ something up (to consume all of something by drinking it)  
\_\_\_\_\_ something in ( to take in and process something such as information, a sight, a story, etc.)  
\_\_\_\_\_ to someone or something (to drink in honour of someone or something)
- 2) Ask students to think of a situation in which they could adequately use one of the expressions and share it with the rest of the class. Correct or help if necessary. If any of the expressions don't get picked, provide a situation yourself.
- 3) Put students into small groups (3-5) and ask them to share information about whether they drink, how often, in which situations, what they drink – and possibly reasons why they drink/have drunk. Encourage students to share when they last drank to someone, etc. (using the expressions from the lead-in).
- 4) Put students into pairs and give them 5 to 10 minutes to discuss and come to an agreement on the 3 best positive and 3 best negative aspects of drinking alcohol. After each pair has come up with their lists they should then join another pair and the 4 students should compare / share their lists and decide on a 'new' list of 3+ and 3- for the group. If they have similar lists, this stage is easier.
- 5) Divide the board into 2 and write a "+" on one side and a "-" on the other. Students from the groups take turns writing something on one of the sides. Elicit from SS whether there are any aspects that they hadn't thought of, if there are any they disagree with, if they were surprised by any. Ask them to choose which argument they believe to be the strongest and justify their choice to the rest of the group.

## Notes

If SS have access to the internet on school equipment or their own devices, give them time to do a quick search for risks and benefits of alcohol consumption and compare their findings to the list created by the group.

## Religion – David

Aims: 1) To develop learners' ability to express opinions and beliefs. 2) To engage learners in an extended debate. 3) To promote constructive critical thinking.

Level: B1-C2

### Procedure

- 1) On the board, write the following: 'The tooth fairy' / 'Human beings are basically good' / 'We will eventually cure cancer'. Ask learners what they think. Get some content feedback. Then ask learners what the 3 things have in common (they are beliefs).
- 2) Ask the learners to write down 10 things they believe or believe in. Allow approximately 5 minutes for this. It doesn't matter if they don't get 10. Feedback: Give out board pens and ask individuals to write their ideas up – but no repetition is allowed.
- 3) Opt Out Stage: Explain to learners in the main task they will be debating whether you should believe in these ideas or not. Bearing that in mind, is there anything they would prefer not to discuss? (e.g. some learners might not feel comfortable debating the existence of God). An alternative is to give small slips of paper and allow learners to anonymously tell you of their preferences. Delete any items from the board as identified.
- 4) Elicit any phrases the learners think they might need to use in the debate, reformulate them where necessary, and extend with additional phrases or expressions. You could also revisit modal verbs for deduction or speculation, etc.
- 5) Divide the class into two groups. Group A has to find reasons to believe in the items on the board, Group B has to find reasons not to. You can also ask them to predict their opponents' arguments and prepare responses / rebuttals. All group members should take notes to refer to later.
- 6) This is an opposition debate, so pair learners off – one from group A with one from group B. To increase the confrontational aspect, seat them facing each other in two opposing lines down the middle of the room. Tell them their job is to prove the other person wrong! And off they go!
- 7) Throughout their debate, monitor for any language issues or examples of good language which can then inform an error correction / language feedback and reformulation stage at the end of the activity. You may also want to talk to the class about how they felt discussing their beliefs in this way, whether it was a positive or negative experience, and if they would like to do something similar again.



## Sex – Adam

Aims: 1) To reflect on cultural/personal values towards (homo)sexuality and homophobia. 2) To develop learners' ability to express opinions and beliefs, as well as the ability to express agreement and/or disagreement. 3) To promote constructive critical thinking and open discussion.

Level: B1+

### Procedure

- 1) Compile a list of 'interesting facts' about homosexuality and present them as 'true or false' statements. Take headings such as 'A man's chances of being gay increases with the increasing number of elder brothers he has' from <http://akorra.com/2010/03/22/top-ten-fascinating-facts-about-homosexuality/>. One good tactic is to leave all of your chosen statements unchanged, i.e. true. Alternatively, edit them to make each more interesting or curious.
- 2) Get learners to work in groups and give them time to decide if each statement is true: they should come to a consensus.
- 3) Give them the link and ask them to check their answers using their own mobile devices or the school's computers. An optional extra here is to ask them about the trustworthiness of the website and initiate a discussion as to the veracity of the information.
- 4) Write the word homophobia on the board and discuss its meaning as a class. At this point you could introduce common words for describing homosexuals (gay, queer, etc.) and discuss which are deemed ok and which are derogatory terms.
- 5) Provide learners with a few example statements like those below: individually, they decide whether the statement/incident is homophobic or not and the reason for their decision. They then discuss their thoughts in groups.
  - a) Zeynep is watching TV with her father, and he changes the channel three times before sighing and saying, 'These gay people are all over the TV nowadays. It's like they're controlling everything. I've got no problem with them, but they don't have to shove it in my face.'
  - b) Kemal is a new student at school and doesn't like sport. Also, his best friend is a girl. When he walks past a group of boys, they whisper the words 'queer' and 'gay boy'.
  - c) Sezen, who is Kemal's best friend, is with him when the boys are whispering these insults. She feels embarrassed for Kemal, so she pretends she didn't hear them.

- d) Ahmet's mum has just bought a new Mini. Ahmet's best friend laughs when he sees it and says, 'I can't believe she bought that car! Minis are the gayest cars you can get.'
- 6) Learners discuss as a class whether these things are homophobic (they are in different ways: Zeynep's dad is being 'indirectly' homophobic, Kemal is suffering 'direct' homophobia, Sezen is practicing 'silent' homophobia by pretending that it isn't happening and Ahmet's friend is being 'casually' homophobic.)
- 7) Explicitly teach several phrases for giving opinions ('If you ask me'), and for showing agreement ('I share your opinion on that') or disagreement ('I'm not with you on that').
- 8) Select a number of statements relating to how people respond to homosexuality from <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/assault/etc/quiz.html> and conduct a class debate. To make this more impersonal and less threatening, adapt each statement so that it starts, 'In my culture, typically...'

## Narcotics – Katherine

Aims: 1) To find out some facts about the most common recreational drugs. 2) To develop study skills and writing skills (transferring information). 3) To share opinions about the use of recreational drugs.

Level: B1-C1

### Procedure

- 1) Draw a marijuana leaf on the board, line by line, building up the picture slowly and asking ‘What’s this?’ after each line. Encourage students to guess. When somebody guesses correctly or the picture is complete, explain that in today’s lesson you are going to find out some facts about recreational drugs.
- 2) Draw an empty fact file on the board with the heading ‘Cannabis’ and then two columns. In the left-hand column write the following points, each on a separate row: common names, origin (countries), appearance, how it is used, how much it costs, how much people use, effects, risks, number of deaths. Leave the right-hand column empty for now.
- 3) Put students into groups and ask them to discuss the information in the fact file, sharing their opinions and speculating if they don’t know the answer. Tell students they have 5 to 10 minutes for this stage.
- 4) Show students a copy of the Media Guide to Drugs. It can be downloaded as a pdf at <http://www.drugscope.org.uk/resources/Media+Guide> or students can access the guide on a mobile phone or tablet. Explain that this document contains key facts and figures for journalists who are writing about drug issues in the UK. Tell students to find the section about Cannabis (page 25) and check their ideas.
- 5) Complete the right-hand column in the fact file (from stage 2) by eliciting information around the class.
- 6) Give each group one of the other common recreational drugs from the list. They should copy the fact file and transfer the key information from the guide.
- 7) Make a class display with fact files. Give students time to read all of the information.
- 8) Finish the class with an informal discussion. Write these questions on the board and encourage students to share their ideas and opinions. Students should give reasons to support their opinions.

Has any of this information surprised you?

Is this kind of information useful?

Which of these drugs is the most dangerous?



Should any of these drugs be legal? Which one(s)

## Isms – Noreen

Aims: 1) To discuss the role of symbolism in society and look at conflicts amongst groups. 2) To reflect on a current event related to racism and analyze both sides of the argument.

Level: B2+

### Procedure

- 1) Show students some symbols, starting with lesser known ones. Examples could be those such as 88 (Heil Hitler), Spanish Falange, Russian National Unity, KKK, Hammer and Sword (German Hitler Youth) and the Swastika. (Symbols chosen could be more country-specific in order to be recognized and provoke reaction from students.) Get them to vote on whether they consider these offensive and able to hurt someone.
- 2) Ask ‘Why do these symbols cause offense?’ Elicit ideas such as intrinsic meaning, representation, association with certain groups, etc.
- 3) Show the following photos (quick Google search) with the US Confederate/Battle flag and elicit discussion of the symbolism: soldier with the flag, Karen Cooper and the Virginia flag wavers, KKK with the flag, Charleston shooter with the flag. What does the flag represent in each case? Identify the opposing groups involved in each photo and their respective beliefs.
- 4) Show a picture of the flag itself and explain a bit of the history if necessary. Info for TS: The Confederacy was originally formed from 7 lower, mainly agricultural (largely dependent on slave labour) states who sought independence. The American Civil War pitted the Confederates (south) who grew to include 13 states, against the Yankees (north). The controversy comes from the identification of the flag with the slave trade, and its past use by the KKK.
- 5) Prepare the following video of Karen Cooper: <https://vimeo.com/126991396>
- 6) Students watch and answer the following questions:
  - A) What does the flag mean to her? B) Why are the people surprised? C) What does she hope to gain from her actions? D) Why does she say that “slavery is a choice”?(A) The flag represents freedom, because it commemorates when people stood up to tyranny. B) People are surprised because she is a black woman, and the flag is associated with slavery and racism after being used by the KKK to represent white supremacy. C) She wants to wake people up, and to get them to stop thinking that the flag is about race. She wants to open a general discussion about the flag. D) She

says that because given liberty or death, she would choose death. She argues that with the amount of government control nowadays, she feels more like a slave.)

- 7) Divide the students into two sides for a debate on whether the flag should be left in use or not. Each side can use their mobile devices or computer lab to do some research and prepare their arguments. (<http://battleflag.us/>) has various videos showing both sides of the argument and can help students get a better idea of the different perspectives.)

## Pork – Phil

Aims: 1) To analyse how our own cultures affect our perceptions of food. 2) To discuss and justify food preferences. 3) To reflect on cultural respect.

Level: B1+

### Procedure

- 1) Write 'food I love to eat' on one A4 piece of paper and 'food I don't like' on another.
- 2) Tell students to add 1 food to each list. They cannot repeat. Give one paper to the student nearest you on the left and the other to the one on your right. Say that they have 1 minute to complete both lists. With a bigger group, add 1 or 2 more papers.
- 3) Ask the last students with the papers to read out the lists. Select 1 student to write the foods on the board. Ask the others to raise their hands if they agree with each food choice. Count the hands and tell the writer to add the numbers to the board.
- 4) Ask who has a smartphone or a tablet/laptop with internet access. Move students so everyone has a partner or a group of 3 with a connected device. Ask if they have voice search i.e. OK Google or Siri. Do a quick tech check.
- 5) Say you want to discuss the reasons why people don't eat some meat but to do that, they need to do some research. Write 'pork, beef, horse, dog' on the board and elicit what questions they need to use in their search e.g. 'Why don't people eat...?'. Ask them to take turns doing vocal searches and to find 3 reasons for each.
- 6) Go through each meat and ask for volunteers to explain reasons for not eating them. Write nouns on the board such as religion, health, tradition, taste and nutrition.
- 7) Tell the following anecdote:

"A friend went to study in China. He became good friends with his classmates and some local students. One night, they all went out to a local market and the Chinese encouraged the foreigners to try the local specialities of fried scorpions, silkworm cocoons, centipedes, locusts and seahorses." Show/share the images here:  
<http://travel.cnn.com/shanghai/life/5-extreme-foods-at-beijing-night-market-294439>
- 8) Let students react and ask for explanations of how they feel. Draw out opinions by asking which they would eat and which they wouldn't and why. Keep pressing until you get to real reasons and not just "it's horrible". Use the examples from step 6.
- 9) Elicit similar local specialities from the students' own countries.
- 10) Put students into small groups. Ask them to roleplay a situation like the one above where they have invited the others to try local specialities. They should explain what

they are and try to persuade the others to eat them. They can use mobile phones to show images.

- 11) Ask who agreed to eat what and why. Then ask how the students felt when their guests refused to eat their local specialities and what conclusions can be drawn.