

Guessing Answers

How:

1. When there is a list of possible answers, encourage students to guess the answers by saying things like 'There are two words to choose from and only one gap to fill so you've got a 50% chance of being right!'
2. Encourage students to look at the words before and the words after the gap (in a gap-fill - a.k.a. cloze - exercise) to help them decide what type of word is needed in the gap. Will the answer be a verb? An adjective? A noun? In most exercises this will limit their choice of answers and, therefore, increase their chances of guessing the right one.
3. If they are still looking a bit blank it's probably because they are suffering from 'gap-fill tunnel vision' which means that this is what they see:

Irrelevant gobbledegook an _____ with I don't need to read this because it comes after the gap. Would you know what to write in the space? I wouldn't!

4. Encourage them to try to guess the meaning from the context (i.e. the sentence or paragraph the gap is in). Let's look at the same example again, this time with the context:

It rained yesterday when I was out but I hadn't got an _____ with me so I got wet.

In this example the context tells us that the missing word is probably going to be 'umbrella'.

5. This technique also works well when there is a word which the students don't know in a sentence. If they have never seen the word 'umbrella' before and it is in the sentence then the sentence will look something like this to the student:

Irrelevant gobbledegook an *umbskjdghfskjfla* with I needn't read this because it comes after the gap.

Some students will panic at this point and ask you what an *umbskjdghfskjfla* is. You don't need to have the answer spoon-fed to them. If the students use the context to help them they will probably be able to work out the meaning for themselves (see point 4 above) and thus gain confidence as learners.

Why:

1. The students know a lot more than they think they know - the academic term for this is 'passive knowledge'. This basically means that somewhere in the past

they have seen or heard this word or phrase but they don't remember it consciously. (They don't know they know - they think they don't know, but you know better, you think they know - confused yet?) Anyway, if you can get them to make a guess, the chances are that they will get it right quite a lot of the time. If you put the students into pairs or small groups the chances are that with their combined passive knowledge they'll get most of the answers right, though they won't know how they did it. They'll probably think it's just luck. It isn't.

Of course, the good part of all this is that they get most of it right and consequently feel very good. Their confidence is raised and that is half the battle with speaking a foreign language.

2. In real life (outside the classroom) the students will be put in situations where they don't know all the answers or they don't know all the words etc. If they have developed the confidence to trust themselves to make an educated guess here and there it'll help them survive linguistically.
3. In many English language exams it is necessary to do gap-fill/cloze exercises. Students taking exam courses should be encouraged to make guesses left, right and centre in order to avoid ever leaving a space on an exam paper. If nothing is written in the gap the student will receive no marks. If something is written in the space there is a chance, a fair chance, that the answer will be right.