

OPEN-ENDED OPENERS

Generally, people with good oral communication skills are more successful at work and in their social lives than reluctant listeners and talkers. Also, they tend to learn oral language more effectively—probably because they get more practice and enjoy the process more. A major tool of successful interchange is the ability to ask and respond to “open-ended questions”—thought-provoking inquiries that motivate interesting talk and intent listening. The ideas that follow all involve open-ended conversation stimulators.

- ⇒ **SPECIFIC TOPIC OF THESE INSTRUCTIONS:** Language Learning and Communication Styles
- ⇒ **LANGUAGE LEARNING & PROFICIENCY LEVELS:** High Beginning through Advanced
- ⇒ **MATERIALS:** A deck of “Open-Ended Question Cards”

Which language in the world do you like the best? Why?	In what ways are you a good conversationalist?	Is English a difficult language for you? Why or why not?	Do you prefer conversation in a large group, a small group, or with one other person? Why?
What are the “rules” of social conversation in your culture?	What are your three favorite topics of conversation? Why?	In social conversation, would you rather talk or listen? Why?	What’s your favorite means of communication—face-to-face, the telephone, the Internet, or...? Why?
Describe your “body language”—the postures and gestures you use most often to express yourself.	In your view, what is the “secret” of successful communication? Explain your answer.	Describe the “best” accent in English. (Tell its purpose.)	Describe your <i>conversation style</i> in one word—like “shy,” “aggressive,” “loud,” “funny,” etc. Explain your <i>word choice</i> .

Above are some sample *Question Cards*, each with a stimulating open-ended inquiry on the subject of *language* and *interaction*. Cards like these can be used and reused for a variety of communicative oral skills activities. 72 of them are available in *Open-Ended Questions for Social Conversation*, along with a 20-Page *Activity & Idea Book* (ISBN 978-1-891077-14-2) that includes extensive *Question Lists*.

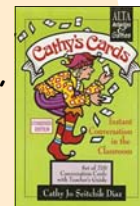


INSTRUCTIONS: *How to Create & an Open-Ended Question-Card Deck*

1. **CREATING A QUESTION-CARD DECK.** Using equally-sized cards, print (out) appropriate *Open-Ended Questions*. The inquiries should be thought-provoking but not embarrassing or threatening. They should serve to evoke open, intelligent, revealing interchanges of feelings, thoughts, opinions, or ideas. If appropriate, the questions can relate to subjects the class has been discussing or researching—as long as they elicit curiosity, stimulate learning, or draw out insights into people’s individual styles, personalities, and values. Collect the cards into a pack to use in a variety of communicative activities and games.

(Self-) Teaching Tips:
Ideas for Open-Ended Questions

A “classic source” of ideas for provocative open-ended questions is *The Book of Questions*, by Gregory Stock (Workman Publishing, New York, 1985, 1987), and related sequels. Designed to stimulate discussion on *values, beliefs, life, personal character, ethical dilemmas*, and the like, questions in each book can be adapted in language and content to *language-proficiency levels, interests and needs, personalities, learning styles*, and the other particulars of each class or learning group. Or both teachers and learners could think up their own questions. There are many online articles about the purposes, benefits, and features of effective “open-ended questions for social interaction.” As well as *Authors & Editors’ Speaking: Open-Ended Questions for Social Conversation*, there are several other published *Card Decks* of this kind.



(Self-) Teaching Tips:
The Concept of Open-Ended Openers in Successful Social Interaction

In addition to fulfilling language improvement aims, *open-ended question and response exchanges* offer insight into effective communication techniques and practices. As an intro or follow-up to *Question-Card* activity, participants might mention ways to relate better with others by becoming good conversationalists. *Authors & Editors’ Speaking: Dual Language Skills for Real-Life Communication* offers a little advice:

- Ask interesting “open-ended questions” that show real interest in others’ *thoughts, preferences, ideas, experiences, and values*. Listen carefully to your conversation partners’ *feelings and ideas*. Respond productively.
- When someone asks thought-provoking questions, don’t respond with short, closed-ended answers. Volunteer interesting information and ideas to keep the conversation going. Be honest in your conversation. Tell about yourself. Share your knowledge, thoughts, ideas, and opinions.
- Help other people feel comfortable when they are conversing with you. Except to add encouragement or to make sure you are following what they are saying, don’t interrupt. Of course, if you can *help* another person to get to the point or to explain more clearly, do so—gently and positively.

If participants follow rules like these, they can enjoy and benefit from engaging interaction with others instead of being bored with stiff, uninvolved “formula talk.” They’ll gain and give valuable insights—into life and well as language learning.

2. **INTERVIEW CIRCLES.** Introduce the *concept* of open-ended queries + responses in social interaction, perhaps by reading aloud a few items from the *Card Deck* and discussing possible responses. Then use part of the pack for social conversation.



- **SET-UP.** Half of the group or class stands in a circle, facing out. The other half forms an *outside circle*, so that each person is facing someone, who becomes his/her conversation partner for the first question-&-answer exchange. Everyone in the outer circle receives a different card, with an open-ended question on it.
- **OUTER → INNER.** Everyone in the outer circle asks his/her partner the question on his/her *Card*. While “insiders” are answering, questioners use gestures, sounds, and possibly additional questions to encourage them to keep talking on the same subject for about one-and-a-half minutes. Then they hand their partners their *Question Cards*. They move one person to their right.
- **INNER → OUTER.** Participants in the *inner circle* ask their new partners the questions that they have just finished answering. Questioners keep “outsiders” talking on the same topic for about one-and-a-half minutes. Then they hand them their *Question Cards*. Everyone in the outer circle moves one person to the right.
- **KEEP IT UP.** The above two steps are repeated 5 to 10 more times. With each exchange, half the speakers will be answering—and then asking—a *different* question. When they’re *inquiring*, they do what they can to help their partners express interesting ideas and honest opinions. When they’re *asked* a question, they include as much alluring or amusing detail as possible in their answer.

3. **FOLLOW-UP ACTIVITIES.** There are many workable and beneficial interactive activities and games based on *Open-Ended Question Cards*. Here are some of the simpler suggestions to choose from.

- **COMPARING ANSWERS.** The class divides into small groups. Each group receives a set of *Question Cards*. Its leader reads aloud the first question. Everyone answers the same question in one minute or less. Then the group decides which response was the *best* (the *clearest*, the *most interesting*, the *funniest*, etc.) and figures out why. Repeat with 5 to 10 more questions.
- **“CONVERSATIONAL ROLES.”** The class divides into groups, each with a stack of *Question Cards* face down on a table. Each group member in turn draws the top card from the pile and reads the question aloud to the participant to his/her right. That person answers the question in one minute or less. The next person to the right *paraphrases* the *second* person’s answer (restates the point in his/her own words. *The fourth group member comments on the third person’s summary.* The fifth member, if any, asks the *first* person a question about what he/she originally or subsequently said in this round of the conversation.

Would you rather talk with someone *more or less* intelligent or knowledgeable than you? Why?

Do you like to argue? Why or why not? Are you good at winning an argument? How?

When you tell a story, do you tend to exaggerate the truth? If so, why and how?

If you could change one—and only one—thing about yourself, what would it be?

Tell about a person you can’t stand. What is his or her *best* characteristic?

More ideas for open-ended question cards designed for language learners—including queries into personal values.

- **TRUTH OR “PUT ON?”** In small groups, each person in turn picks a different card from the back of the pack, reads the question aloud, and answers it—either by *telling the truth* or by *making up a “story.”* The group tries to judge whether each speaker’s answer was *real and sincere* or a self-invented “put on.”
- **“WHAT’S THE QUESTION?”** In small groups, each person in turn picks a different *Card* and answers without reading the question aloud. The group tries to figure out what question each speaker has answered.
- **“GETTING TO KNOW YOU.”** Every participant picks a *Question Card* or makes up an interesting open-ended question of his/her own. He/She circulates around the room to ask 3 different people that same question, taking notes on each response. After a time limit, the class gets back together. Each participant in turn tells his/her question, introduces the 3 people who answered it, and paraphrases or summarizes each of their 3 answers. The whole group guesses (tries to agree on) *who gave which answer* and tells the reasons for their hunch.



LEVELS = Beginning to Advanced (How to Adapt)

↓ Lowest-level students can benefit from open-ended *Question-Card* activities if they’re given possible answers *in advance* to practice and adapt to their own situations or truths. Provide sufficient preparation so that participants have the required *sentence structures* and the necessary *vocabulary* to formulate interesting and authentic responses.

↑ After participating in one or more activities or games involving open-ended queries and responses, the most advanced students should be able to make up their own questions, write them on cards, and use them in above-suggested ways or in procedures of their own. Have participants understood the point and the function of such questions in effective personal interaction and in getting to know one another? Then eventually, they’ll be able to think of imaginative questions that stimulate creativity and honesty in others.

VARIATIONS & OTHER AREAS OF APPLICATION

The best kinds of open-ended questions for stimulating getting-acquainted interactions are personal ones that motivate honest answers about participants’ feelings, experiences, thoughts, and (especially) values. Questions that elicit opinions on current political and moral issues can also be effective, especially when learners are required to *back up* their responses with their reasoning and rational thought.