

Speaking Activities for ESL High School Students

Low-prep, fun, and classroom-tested ideas with sentence starters and examples.

Teaching speaking to ESL high school students can feel overwhelming—especially when students are shy, tired, or unsure of their English.

These speaking activities are designed to:

- Reduce anxiety
- Increase participation
- Support sentence building
- Work in real classrooms (not just theory)

■ Why Speaking Activities Matter

Many ELL students understand more than they can say. Speaking activities help students:

- Practice real communication
- Build confidence
- Use grammar in context
- Improve fluency over time

■■ Activity 1: This or That (Partner Talk)

Students choose between two options and explain why.

Examples:

- Coffee or tea?
- City or countryside?

Sentence starters:

■ *I prefer ____ because ____*

■ *I like ____ more than ____ because ____*

➤ *Great for: beginners to intermediate*

■■ Activity 2: Give Directions

Students work in pairs using a classroom map. Student A gives directions; Student B listens and finds the location.

Sentence starters:

- *Go straight*
- *Turn left / right*
- *It is next to ____*

➤ *Great for: structured speaking + listening*

■ Activity 3: Role Play Scenarios

Give students real-life situations: ordering food, asking for help, talking to a teacher.

Sentence starters:

- *Can you help me with ____?*
- *I need ____*
- *Excuse me, where is ____?*

➤ *Great for: real-world language*

■ Activity 4: Interview a Partner

Students ask and answer structured questions.

Examples:

- What do you do after school?
- What is your favorite place?

➤ *Tip: Give them a worksheet or speaking guide for scaffolding*

■ Activity 5: Mystery Situation (FUN!)

Students get a situation: "You are lost in a city." They must ask for help and explain their problem.

Sentence starters:

- *Excuse me, I need help because ____*
- *Can you tell me how to get to ____?*

➤ *This creates REAL communication!*

■ Teacher Tips

- **Always provide sentence starters** — Starters remove blank-page anxiety so students focus on ideas.
 - **Model the activity first** — Demonstrate with a volunteer before pairs begin.
 - **Keep groups small** — Pairs or groups of 3 maximize talk time.
 - **Focus on communication** — Don't correct every mistake—prioritize getting students talking.
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