

Enliven Your Class and Engage Your Students with Fun Facts

Fun facts—facts that are interesting, unusual, and often little-known—are a popular form of entertainment throughout the world. There are countless books, TV quiz shows (*Jeopardy!*), board games (*Trivial Pursuit*), and museums (*Ripley's Believe It or Not!*) dedicated to trivia and the unusual that fascinate people of all ages. Short oral presentations of fun facts will captivate your students, engage them, and enliven your class. Fun facts can do all of the following:

- bring fun and humor to a lesson;
- add variety and provide a change of pace;
- serve as a springboard for a short discussion; and
- provide a productive filler when you find yourself with extra time in a lesson.

A trip to the trivia section in your local library or an internet search will turn up facts that are curious (Leona Helmsley left her dog 12 million U.S. dollars when she died), amusing (a Canadian couple got married on Halloween dressed as Frankenstein and the bride of Frankenstein), and hard to believe (Jarrad Young of Australia did 2,806 nonstop push-ups in one hour).

You can find fun facts on a variety of topics, such as animals (the heart of a blue whale is as large as a small car), the human body (there is enough tissue in a pair of human lungs to cover a tennis court), the universe (there are more stars in the universe than grains of sand on all the beaches on Earth), cities (there are no stop signs in Paris), environmental

concerns (about 27,000 trees are cut down every day to make toilet paper), and famous people (Napoleon was afraid of cats).

There are good reasons for using activities based on fun facts:

- *They are enjoyable.* Like listening to jokes or songs, hearing strange or humorous facts is enjoyable. Learning is enhanced when an activity is so much fun that the students forget (at least temporarily) that they are in a classroom.
- *They are captivating.* Every teacher knows the importance of using texts (oral or written) that their students find interesting and that will hold their attention.

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meaningful, not just a “classroom performance.”**

- *They engage the students.* Activities with interesting, unusual facts lead to active student participation, whether that be paying close attention to a short oral text or giving a personal comment on what was heard.
- *They offer opportunities for short, authentic verbal responses.* Given the captivating nature of the facts, the students’ reactions and responses will be authentic and meaningful, not just a “classroom performance.”

A number of English as a second or foreign language (ESL/EFL) professionals recognize the pedagogic potential of fun facts. Ur and Wright (1992, 2) include an activity called Amazing Facts, in which the teacher or a student informs the class about “something they may not be familiar with and which is likely to amaze them.” Crawford (2001) presents an activity based on world records in which students, working in small groups, get practice in the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. In a subsequent article (2002), Crawford gives a rationale for using trivia to teach conversation, shows how it fits into communicative language teaching, and demonstrates how trivia-based TV game shows and board games can be adapted for use in the classroom.

Stannard (2004) presents three simple activities using fun facts. In Fascinating Facts, each student is given a “fact” that may or may not be true. The students walk around the class, share their information with their classmates, and keep a record of how many

of their classmates thought their fact was true. At the end, each student presents their results to the class, and the teacher tells the class whether that piece of information was true or not. (An alternative is to have the students find out for themselves whether their “fact” is true.) In Animal Oddities, students are put in groups and given ten facts referring to different animals; the groups decide which animal each fact refers to. In Figures of Fun, students match a set of numbers with the facts to which they refer (for example, 60 miles per hour could be matched with the speed of a cough). Spafford (2022) has a true-or-false activity called Amazing Facts, which is similar to Stannard’s (2004) Fascinating Facts. Bilborough (2022) presents a pair-work information-gap activity called Fun Facts that uses trivia to practice question forms. Both Myers (2011) and Ur and Wright (1992) suggest general-knowledge quizzes using interesting facts.

Interesting and amusing facts can be used with teens, young adults, and adults. With adaptations (by simplifying and at times pre-teaching vocabulary), they can be used as of the second book of a basic four-book series, after the students have had around 100 (or more) hours of previous English language instruction.

Ideally you would have a collection of fun facts to consult while planning a lesson, but that could also be a resource you can turn to during a lesson when you realize you need a short, interesting activity different from what you had originally planned. One ready-made

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collection is *Fun Facts for the EFL/ESL Classroom* (Silvers 2021). Other sources I have found useful are listed in the Resources and Websites for Fun Facts sections at the end of this article.

LISTENING FOR PLEASURE VERSUS PRACTICING LISTENING COMPREHENSION

This article is about using short, occasional oral presentations of fun facts to enliven your class and engage your students. These presentations are not intended for the practice of listening comprehension (though some of the activities are commonly found in listening-practice exercises); they are for listening for pleasure, listening for entertainment, and listening as a fun activity, and optionally for listening as a stimulus leading to other activities, such as role plays, student commentaries, and vocabulary enhancement. Listening to fun facts for pleasure—similar to listening to jokes, songs, poems, and anecdotes—is motivating, as students will want to understand. Listening for pleasure also exposes students to new language for incidental acquisition and helps develop the listening skill without directly focusing on it.

Fun facts can, however, be the basis of listening-comprehension exercises. For example, a series of lessons could be devised around numbers. The possibilities include lessons for numbers used in dates (Agatha Christie was born in 1890 and died in 1976), measurements (the average male giraffe is around 5.5 meters tall), statistics (in 2020, the population of São Paulo was 21,850,000), and ages (at the age of 101, Mary Hardison did a tandem paraglide). Morley (1972a, 1972b) has lessons on numbers and numerical relationships, dates and chronological order, and measurements and amounts using dictations of interesting and educational

facts. Crawford and Powell (2001) describe activities using trivia to teach the subskills of (1) listening to questions and responding, (2) listening for specific information, and (3) listening to descriptions.

TEACHING OPTIONS

There are several options for using fun facts in your classroom. The option or options you choose will depend on your objective (to provide a quick filler; to provide a moment of listening for pleasure; to give students something to talk about), the level of your students, and the time you would like to devote to the activity. The options allow you to spend as little as a few minutes to potentially a whole class session. I present the options under three headings: (1) options before presenting, (2) options during presenting, and (3) options after presenting.

There are, however, three basic options for classroom organization that apply to all the activities for before and after presenting a set of facts. You can (1) use a traditional teacher-fronted, whole-class organization in which you call on individual students to respond; (2) have students work in groups; or (3) have students work in pairs.

The whole-class organization is the easiest and least time-consuming, but it offers fewer opportunities for individual participation. It is a good choice for a quick activity when time is limited and speaking is not the goal. Small groups are a good choice if you have time and if the goal is for the students to exchange opinions—for example, saying what they know or think about a topic. Pair-work activities are usually “easier to set up, manage and control than group work” (Seligson 1997, 44) and can be a good choice “if you want to maximize student talking time” (45).

Ask the students to guess the answer to a pre-listening question whose answer is stated or implied in the facts you are going to read.
For example, “What’s the greatest recorded human age?”

Options before presenting

You do not want to jump abruptly into the activity; you want to have a lead-in that sets up what you are going to do. If you are going to start your class with a fun-fact activity, you might say, “Let’s begin today with a fun fact.” If it comes after another activity, you might transition by commenting on the previous activity and saying simply, “Now, how about a fun fact?” Here are selected options:

1. Do nothing. No pre-teaching of vocabulary. Go directly to presenting the set of facts. You might feel that your students will not have a problem with the vocabulary, or you might want to have them try to figure out the meaning of new words that they hear. Likewise, you might feel that any unusual names in the facts will not present a problem. After the presentation, you could ask the students if they have any comments or if there were any words they did not understand.
2. Put the name of the person you are going to talk about on the board. You might then say something like, “I’m going to tell you some facts about *Usain Bolt*.” This is especially useful for little-known, unusual, or foreign names, names that the students would not otherwise recognize or understand in the oral presentation. This also applies to the names of countries, landmarks, national dishes, and so on.
3. Have the class pronounce the name on the board along with you. Unsure how to pronounce the name of a person (Aneta Florczyk), country (Luxembourg), city (Reykjavík), or natural wonder (aurora borealis)? Many online dictionaries provide a pronunciation for common words, including countries and cities, and some well-known people, although not all such dictionaries will be useful for lesser-known places and people. A website that resolves this problem is NaturalReader (www.naturalreaders.com), which contains instructions on converting text into speech.
4. Pre-teach vocabulary that you believe your students are unfamiliar with, especially any words that are essential to the comprehension of the oral text.
5. Ask the students what they know about the person or topic you are going to talk about: “What do you know about the *Eiffel Tower*?” This activates their knowledge, which in turn will facilitate their comprehension.
6. Ask the students to guess the answer to a pre-listening question whose answer is stated or implied in the facts you are going to read. For example, “What’s the greatest recorded human age?” The students make guesses, which can be put on the board. This works best for numerical facts, but it can also be used for other facts: “What country is known as ‘The Land of Smiles’?” These questions are not designed to test listening comprehension but rather to get the students thinking about the topic. The act of guessing leads to greater engagement. (*Note:* The oldest verified human age is 122 years, 164 days; “The Land of Smiles” is an unofficial nickname of Thailand.)

7. Ask the class to listen for the answer to a pre-listening question but without any guessing activity. Perhaps you have limited time or just want to provide a question to focus the students' attention during the oral presentation.
8. Make a statement and ask the class to guess whether it is true or false. For example, "True or false? Elephants can smell water more than four kilometers away." (The statement is true, by the way.)

Options during presenting

These options concern how the oral text is delivered. Speak at a natural speed. Unnaturally slow and excessively clear speech is often counterproductive, as it can "distort the way the language sounds" (Helgesen 2003, 32).

1. Read the set of facts at a normal speed without pauses.
2. Read at a normal speed but with slight pauses. Pauses between phrases and sentences offset the feeling that the speech is too fast and facilitate comprehension (Helgesen 2003).
3. Read the first sentence at a normal speed (with or without pauses). Stop and ask the students if they would like to hear it again or if they are ready for the next sentence.
4. Use the website NaturalReader to present the facts; it permits you to expose your students to a variety of voices and accents. For fun, you can select a slightly faster speed and challenge your students to see how much they understand. You can also have the facts read twice, each time with a different accent or at a different speed.

Options after presenting

While the following options can be done immediately after a set of facts has been

presented, you may prefer to assign some as homework for a future class presentation.

1. Ask the class if there were any words they did not understand.
2. Do vocabulary development. Write a word from the presentation on the board and ask the students to think of synonyms or antonyms. They can be asked to make a sentence with the word. They can make a list of words associated with the word or topic; for example, a list of words associated with weddings or funerals. Activities such as these can also be used for pre-teaching vocabulary.
3. Put three adjectives and the sentence "I thought it was _____." on the board. Ask the students to choose the adjective that best describes their opinion about what they just heard. Then ask for a show of hands for each adjective. Some possible adjectives: *amazing* – *boring* – *curious* – *entertaining* – *fascinating* – *funny* – *impressive* – *improbable* – *incredible* – *interesting* – *strange* – *surprising* – *unbelievable*.
4. Ask the students their opinion about someone or something mentioned in the facts. On hearing that Englishman Tim FitzHigham rowed across the English Channel in a bathtub, the students might say he was *crazy*, *foolish*, or *courageous*.
5. Ask the students to find more facts about what was just presented and report them to the class. This can be assigned as homework, or it can be done on the spot, with the students using their mobile phones or computer tablets. For suggestions on how to use mobile devices in the classroom, see Chiverton (2017), Hockly and Dudeney (2014), Reinders (2010), and Şad (2008).
6. Follow up with a question. After you have given the fact that the average person forgets 90 percent of their

dreams, ask the class if they remember their dreams. This leads to option number 7.

7. Use the facts that you presented as a springboard for conversation, discussion, or debate.
8. Ask the students to prepare an imaginary interview. After hearing that Aloha Wanderwell was the first person to drive around the world, they could research and prepare an imaginary interview with her. A further option: For all the questions except two, they give factual answers; for those two, they invent an answer. The interview is then read or performed to the class, and the class must guess which answers were factual and which were invented.
9. Have the students prepare a short skit or dialogue. After hearing that Reed Harris hid the engagement ring for his prospective fiancée in her milkshake, the students could prepare a dialogue between Harris and his future fiancée.
10. Show or project a picture related to the fun fact: “Here’s a picture of Beethoven.” However, that could be followed by conversation-starting questions: “What do you think of Beethoven’s music? What kind of music do you listen to?” Besides Google, a good source for images is Kiddle (<https://kids/kiddle.co>). (Note: It is not dot “com.”) Select “Images” or “Kimages.”
11. Show a YouTube video related to the facts. After telling the class that German gymnast Johanna Quaas was still doing cartwheels and headstands at the age of 91, you could show her in action in a video.

Further suggestions

- Use contracted forms (e.g., *he’s*, *she’s*, *it’s*, *that’s*, *there’s*, *they’re*, *isn’t*, *aren’t*). Present the facts to the class in an informal,

conversational style, noting that one of the characteristics of spoken English is the prevalence of contracted forms.

- Convert measurements to the standard used in your country. Almost every country except the United States uses the metric system. If your search turns up facts using inches, feet, or pounds, convert them to the metric system of centimeters, meters, and kilos. In the United States, be prepared to use both systems in your ESL classes.
- Use concrete comparisons. You will find many facts related to height, length, and weight. These facts become easier to visualize when they are accompanied by a concrete comparison: The Ain Dubai Ferris wheel is 250 meters (820 feet) high—that’s as tall as an 80-story skyscraper; the heaviest baby at birth weighed as much as a watermelon; the heaviest insect can weigh as much as two mice. The items of comparison should be culturally appropriate. Students who have never seen a watermelon would not relate to it as an image of comparison. You can search the internet using phrases like “things that weigh 100 kilos” or “things that are two meters long.”
- Plan a fun-facts activity in which the students do the presenting. Each student finds their own facts, which they share with the class. Afterwards, students vote on which fact was the most interesting, unusual, entertaining, or unbelievable. Lower-level students may benefit from hearing their facts pronounced by NaturalReader prior to their presentations.

CONCLUSION

This article has described ways to use fun facts in ESL/EFL classrooms to motivate and engage students. Activities can be done (1) before presenting, (2) during the presentation, and (3) after presenting a

set of facts; there are opportunities to use contracted forms, the measurement standard of your own country (metric or U.S. standard), concrete comparisons, and student-centered activities. In recent years, various ESL/EFL practitioners have recognized the pedagogic potential of fun facts, and the number of ideas on how to implement them in the classroom continues to grow.

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WEBSITES FOR FUN FACTS

Encyclopedias and Facts for Kids	
Ducksters	ducksters.com
Fact Monster	factmonster.com
Facts Just For Kids	factsjustforkids.com
Fun Facts For Kids	fun-facts.org.uk
Kiddle	kids.kiddle.co (not dot "com")
Simple English Wikipedia	simple.wikipedia.org
General Fun Facts	
facts legend	factslegend.org
OhFact!	ohfact.com
theFACTfile	thefactfile.org
The Fact Site	thefactsite.com
Facts about People	
Ducksters	ducksters.com (see "Biography")
theFACTfile	thefactfile.org (see "People")
Records	
Most Extreme	mostextreme.org
Guinness World Records	guinnessworldrecords.com
Facts about Countries	
theFACTfile	thefactfile.org (see "Countries")
Facts about Science	
Science Kids	sciencekids.co.nz

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RESOURCES FOR FUN FACTS

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