

Hot Seat: **Student-Generated Interactive Questions and Conversation Activities**

Overview

For students who are eager for more speaking practice, using an interactive, conversational activity like “Hot Seat” can give them opportunities to communicate authentically in English, to practice targeted grammatical structures or vocabulary, and to get to know each other on a more personal level. Little preparation is required, particularly if the class learns and follows the Hot Seat routine on a regular basis. For students who have limited experience in the classroom, this student-led process of asking and answering questions, turn-taking, clarifying misunderstandings, and taking responsibility for practicing English provides an excellent opportunity to learn classroom protocol and behaviors. This document explains how to conduct the Hot Seat activity and describes how one adult ESL class completed their own authentic Hot Seat activity. It concludes with extension activities and variations of the Hot Seat activity for different student populations.

Description of the Hot Seat Activity

To begin, the teacher and/or students decide on a specific conversation topic to frame the activity. This topic may be related to the current textbook or life skills unit (i.e., shopping, health care, holidays) or focused on a particular language structure being studied (i.e., the past tense, conditionals, or descriptive vocabulary). One student volunteers to sit in the “Hot Seat” chair in the front of the room. While in the Hot Seat, the student has control of the class. She is responsible for calling on students who have a question and addressing them directly by name, rather than looking at the teacher to facilitate the communication. The audience is responsible for listening to one other’s questions and helping one another to ask culturally appropriate questions, to incorporate pre-determined themes, vocabulary, or grammar structures as much as possible, and to avoid repetition of questions.

Hot Seat becomes a communication session by and for the students – the teacher disappears into the audience and jots down each question as it is asked and the name of the student who asked the question. Although there are bound to be mistakes, the teacher’s job is to observe and write down the students’ questions in the correct form; the students’ job is to use various clarification techniques if the questions or answers have not been understood. All students should be taught how to refuse to answer a question if they find it inappropriate or uncomfortable.

The Hot Seat activity can last as long as the class would like; in general, 10 minutes might be a good goal to begin. It is important that students have enough time to generate a list of questions that the teacher can write down for later practice.

At the end of the session, the teacher has the list of questions that students generated and communicated among themselves, and does a quick listening comprehension check to see what information the audience understood and retained about the Hot Seat student. Before the next class session, the teacher types up the questions, noting who asked which question, and gives each student a copy of the question list at the next class. After reviewing the questions, the students practice asking and answering them in a rotating line dialogue.

Session 1: A content topic and/or grammar focus for Hot Seat is proposed and selected by the teacher	
<i>Hot Seat student volunteer</i>	Sits in a chair at the front of the class; establishes how the Q&A will be conducted; facilitates the Q&A
<i>Other students</i>	Ask targeted questions, one by one, to the Hot Seat Volunteer; listen to others’ questions so as not to repeat; monitor for appropriate questions; help others
<i>Teacher</i>	Sits in back of room and writes down student names and questions they ask. Conducts quick listening comprehension check at end of activity, using questions just asked, modeling 3 rd person singular. Types up student questions in correct forms before next class.
Session 2: Students recycle questions through conversations	
<i>Teacher</i>	Distributes typed Hot Seat questions; reviews questions, question types, vocabulary, etc.; has students number off or otherwise divide into two lines; monitors and/or participates in line dialogue
<i>All students</i>	Divide into two lines for line dialogue; practice asking and answering questions twice; practice asking follow-up questions; update question collections and note progress / goals

To conduct a line dialogue, learners form two lines (Line A and Line B) facing each other. Everyone has a copy of the student-generated Hot Seat question list. To begin, Line A students select questions from the list and ask them to the person across from them in Line B. Line B students listen and respond to the questions. All pairs talk at once. After 2 minutes, students in Line A remain where they are but students in Line B move one person to the right (the last person at the end of Line B should move around to the other end of Line B). Then students in Line B ask questions from the list to the person across from them in Line A. After 2 minutes, Line B moves one person to the right again while Line A remains in the same place and asks questions. Students repeat the process one more time, with students in Line B asking the questions. At the end of the line dialogue, students in Line A should have had a chance to ask questions from the list to 2 different people and students in Line B should have done the same. In total, all students should have practiced the questions with four different people. This activity provides the teacher with an excellent opportunity to observe learners' speaking and listening skills, vocabulary knowledge, question formation or clarification skills, and even comfort level using English.



Hot Seat works for many reasons. As a weekly routine, it takes little preparation or explanation while serving as a way to hold students accountable for effort and participation in class. It encourages student ownership by using the authentic ideas, questions, and opinions of the adult students themselves, often ranging in topic from family background and everyday activities, to deeper thoughts about life and the immigrant experience. The students also enjoy learning about and discussing the countries, geography, languages, and cultures of their fellow students.

Hot Seat provides many ways to incorporate specific vocabulary or grammar that the class is studying by asking students to gear their questions to a specific topic. Communication strategies for lower level students are implicitly taught by practicing clarification, confirmation, and comprehension checks; more advanced students work on paraphrasing skills. At the end of the course, students have a collection of questions they can use as conversation starters with coworkers, to study question structure, or to use as journal writing prompts.

Hot Seat Example: Lorena

The following section features an example of a real Hot Seat activity that students in a high beginning ESL class in Virginia experienced together. The students in this class came mainly from Central and South America and had been in the United States for periods ranging from a few months to many years. This Hot Seat took place at the beginning of a course, so students were still getting to know one another. The class decided that the topic of the evening's Hot Seat activity would be "Learning More about Each Other." Lorena volunteered to sit in the Hot Seat. After reviewing the ground rules for Hot Seat, the teacher, Sarah, turned the class over to Lorena. Although students in the class were mostly at the Student Performance Level (SPL) 2 or 3, they were eager to practice their English by asking Lorena questions about herself. Sarah sat in the back of the class and wrote down the students' questions in correct English. Their question formation and vocabulary skills were limited, but they worked together to get their meaning across. Here is the student-generated question list (in target English form) that Sarah wrote down:

Hot Seat – LORENA

Date: August 18

Topic: *Learning More about Each Other*

Luis	What is your hobby?
Ricardo	What is your favorite music?
Sokhen	How do you feel in the Hot Seat?
Elizabeth	Are you going to take a vacation? Why?
Sokhen	How many hours is it by airplane to your country?
Miriam	Where does your family live?
Latifa	Why did you choose to come to the U.S.?
Sokhen	How long have you been here?
Miriam	Are you married or single?
Rosalia	What did you do last week?
Miriam	Where is your boyfriend from?
Maria	Do you worry about living in the U.S.?
Jose	Who is your favorite partner in the class?
Carlos	How many days do you work every week?
Sonia	How many brothers do you have?
Latifa	What do you think about your job?
Josue	What do you love?
Miriam	Who is the president of your country?
Maria	Do you like the president? Why?
Sokhen	Do you drive to work? How long does it take you to go to work?
Elizabeth	Do you wake up early?
Ricardo	Do you come to school by bus or car?
Rosalia	How do you practice English?

Immediately following Lorena's experience, Sarah tested the class' listening comprehension by repeating some of the questions she wrote down and asking the class to respond chorally and in complete sentences:

Sarah: So let's see what you remember about Lorena. What is Lorena's favorite music?

Class: Salsa

Sarah: Her favorite music is...

Class: Her favorite music is salsa.

Sarah: How many brothers does she have?

Class: She has 2 brothers.

Sarah: Does she wake up early?

Class: Yes she wakes up early every day.

Etc.

After class, Sarah typed up the questions in chart format and noted some of the participation patterns among the students. Several of the students asked two or more questions, but some students didn't ask any at all. She made a reminder to encourage some of the quieter students to ask at least one question during the next Hot Seat.

During the next class session, Sarah distributed the typed list of questions to the class and asked them to read over it silently, noting which questions they asked and thinking about other questions that they could have asked. Sarah then reviews the Hot Seat questions chart with them to make sure that everyone understands what the questions are before beginning their line dialogue practice. The class then goes out into the hallway and gets into 2 equal lines facing each other. Sarah asks one line to be Line A and to begin asking any questions from the chart to their partner in Line B. After about 2 minutes, Sarah stops and asks everyone in Line B to shift one place to the right. She then points to the students in Line B and asks them to ask any questions from the chart to their partner in Line A. She repeats this process two more times until everyone has had the chance to ask questions twice, answer questions twice, and speak to 4 people. While students are engaged in the line dialogue, Sarah silently observes the conversations that different pairs are having to check that everyone is participating. She notes any struggles that students might have with the questions or conversation. Sarah ends the activity by congratulating students on using their own questions to practice speaking English for an extended period of time, and encourages them to bring these questions to work or home so they can practice with others.

Hot Seat Variations

Once students have generated a list of authentic, topic-based questions, Hot Seat lends itself to many variations and extension activities. Hot Seat encourages student communication both inside and outside the classroom by providing scaffolding to students in a variety of ways. By recycling the students' own questions, students become more invested in the process of communication and become better at tracking their own progress.



- **Recycle student language:** Type up the (corrected) Hot Seat questions and distribute. ● Use the questions for practice in line dialogues (rotate lines so students can ask and answer questions, and can speak to multiple people). ● Write each question on a strip of paper. Student A draws a question strip and asks student B the question, and vice versa. Then A and B switch question strips and ask other students (then switch again, etc.). ● Have students take the Hot Seat questions out of the classroom and ask a friend, neighbor, coworker. ● Turn Hot Seat questions into cloze questions, scrambled questions, tag questions, matching Q&A, follow-up questions, or journal entries.
- **For lower level students:** ● Ask someone to type the Hot Seat questions from the teacher's handwritten notes. ● Reuse and recycle questions before asking students to create new ones. ● Provide a set list of questions to choose from. ● Use "substitution" questions that students create themselves with a set list of vocabulary: "Do you like _____ [apples, bananas, oranges, grapes]?" "What do you do _____ [on Mondays, in the morning, at night]?"
- **For higher level students:** ● Ask a student to write the questions asked to the Hot Seat student, rather than the teacher. ● To practice elaboration and expansion techniques, make a rule that each question (even yes/no) needs to be answered in a certain number of sentences. ● Have students paraphrase information about or "reintroduce" the Hot Seat student.
- Teach and encourage students to work on their *listening comprehension* skills by using *follow-up questions*. Try to have an entire Hot Seat session where each student's question is a follow-up to the previous question.
- Use Hot Seat to *encourage participation*: ● Keep track of who asks each question; have students keep a question log. ● Instead of asking the questions orally, have each student write one question on a piece of paper. Students then take turns drawing the questions from a hat and asking them on behalf of the original question writer.
- Try "**Reverse Hot Seat**": The person in the Hot Seat asks the audience questions.
- Invite *guest speakers* to the Hot Seat to answer questions on a specific topic.
- Make one type of question the *focus* of the Hot Seat event, e.g., ask only "Who," "What," "How many/how much," or Yes/No questions.
- "**Mystery Guest**": As a class, decide on five questions that everyone will answer in writing. Select and present one student's responses and see if the class can guess which classmate it is.
- Use Hot Seat questions as a springboard for a lesson on *punctuation*.
- Facilitate a *question exchange* with another class.

- ❓ Choose a *specific* content domain or grammatical structure for Hot Seat questions to focus on, e.g., past tense questions, questions about likes/dislikes, frequency questions, questions about a special item or picture that the Hot Seat student brought in.
- ❓ Teach students *communication techniques*: Asking for clarification, confirming a response, refusing politely a question, giving examples, framing responses (“In my experience...” or “That’s an interesting question.”).
- ❓ After a good amount of Hot Seat questions have been collected in your class, have students organize questions into different *categories*: Questions to ask strangers, friends, boss, family, or coworkers; best questions to ask on a date; worst questions to ask at a party; thematic topics.
- ❓ Randomly pick 5-7 questions from the Hot Seat collection and ask students to make a *dialogue or skit* in which they have to ask and answer all the questions.
- ❓ **Error correction**: Write the Hot Seat questions down (anonymously) exactly as students say them, and then have the class correct the errors later on.

Created by Sarah Young, Adult ESL Specialist, Center for Applied Linguistics. syoung@cal.org